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Too Common to Count? “Mild” Sexual Assault and Aggression among U.S. College Women

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ABSTRACT

National estimates indicate that approximately 1 in 5 women will experience sexual assault during her time in college. However, measures of assault often exclude “mild” experiences, such as incidents of unwanted touching that were not preceded by force, incapacitation, or coercion. We aimed to document the characteristics of “mild” sexual assault and aggression that college women experience at large parties and bars. In addition, we considered women’s descriptions of assaultive and aggressive incidents in the context of campus climate survey items to evaluate the potential for measurement gaps. Across six focus groups (N = 36) at a large, public university in the midwestern U.S., women described routine experiences of “mild” sexual assault and aggression, so common that often only imprecise counts of their frequency (e.g., “all the time”) were possible. Our findings document the many forms and frequencies of “mild” assault and aggression in college women’s lives, as well as the limits of campus climate surveys in measuring the mundane sexual mistreatment of women in campus life. We develop the term “sexualized aggression” to capture such mistreatment and situate this concept within the larger body of research on campus sexual violence.

Previous research on rates of sexual assault at colleges and universities has found that approximately 20% of undergraduate women experience sexual assault during their time in college (Muehlenhard et al., 2017). While researchers have understandably focused on campus rape (e.g., Wiersma-Mosley et al., 2017), less is known about smaller or more “mild” incidents of sexual misconduct, such as being groped, followed around a venue, or experiencing unwanted and nonconsensual sexualized dancing (“grinding,” e.g., Graham et al., 2010). In their review of 34 studies of campus-based sexual assault, Fedina et al. (2018) reported that unwanted sexual contact (attempted or completed sexual touching, excluding intercourse, that results from force, threat of force, or coercion) was the most common type of sexual assault reported by students. These authors (Fedina et al., 2018) recommended that, “Future studies on [campus sexual assault] should clearly define ... the range of victimization experiences that may fall under ‘unwanted sexual contact’” (p. 88). Institutions must carefully record instances of “mild” sexual misconduct, as campus climate surveys should both identify patterns of sexual misconduct and accurately reflect the range and frequency of mistreatment experienced by young women. Not only are “mild” assault and aggression degrading in and of themselves, but their prevalence may lay the groundwork for normalizing sexual violence.

We argue that these “mild” experiences are so common that they might not be readily recognizable as assault or aggression in comparison to “severe” forms of misconduct. They are nevertheless part of a network of behaviors that routinely require some college students to contend with

nonconsensual and unwanted touch and unwanted attention as part of their social landscape. Campus climate studies aimed at assessing the prevalence of sexual misconduct have often focused on students’ risk factors such as the victim’s or perpetrator’s use of alcohol or drugs prior to the incident (e.g., Cantor et al., 2015; Krebs et al., 2016). These measures are limited, however, because they do not assess more routine experiences of misconduct, leaving these rates unknown. Kelly (2011) has noted that, “few surveys ... ask about the everyday intrusions in which women’s personal space and being with their self is intruded upon: what is measured counts, and not counting means the everydayness of violence is again hidden, minimised and trivialised” (p. xxi). As a result, several questions emerge: (1) what do “mild” experiences of sexual assault and aggression look like? (2) how do college women interpret these experiences? and (3) would these experiences be captured by a campus climate survey that aims to assess the prevalence of sexual misconduct?

Literature Review

Terminology and Definitions

Over the past 40 years, psychologists have developed a range of measures to assess the prevalence of sexual assault and aggression (e.g., Koss & Gidycz, 1985; Koss & Oros, 1982). Kelly’s (1987, 1988) sexual violence continuum model drew researchers’ attention to the commonness of assault by bringing “mild” and “severe” sexual violations together as pieces of the same puzzle. Since then, researchers have examined

“mild” forms of assault and aggression, such as “unwanted sexual contact” (Banyard et al., 2005; Siddique, 2013), “mild sexual aggression” (Testa et al., 2006), “minor’ sexual coercion” (Fiebert & Osburn, 2001; Lipsky et al., 2012), “minor’ sexual assault” (Lipsky et al., 2012; Siddique, 2013), and “minor’ sexual aggression” (Hines & Douglas, 2016). However, even the same terms are dissimilarly operationalized. For example, definitions have inconsistently included: (1) the presence or absence of physical injury, (2) the use of force, (3) whether the act was attempted or completed, (4) the specific body parts involved, and (5) the presence or absence of oral, vaginal, or anal penetration. These conflicting definitions have led to a varied and uneven set of findings and interpretations of assessments of “mild” sexual assault and aggression.

Given that researchers’ measurements are inextricable from their definitions, we also see variability in approaches to measuring sexual assault and aggression. Measures that include some form of “mild” sexual assault tend to assess assaults that occur under specific circumstances, such as those that involve the use of force, threat of force, coercion, or incapacitation (e.g., Deitz et al., 2015; Fiebert & Osburn, 2001; Krebs et al., 2011; Waldner-Haugrud & Magruder, 1995). Some measures reference body parts generally, such as “private parts” (e.g., Thoresen & Øverlien, 2009) or “sexual organ” (e.g., Steel & Herlitz, 2005), or include more specific references, such as “lips, breast/chest, crotch or butt” (e.g., Koss et al., 2007). Some researchers have expanded relevant body parts to include the legs or neck (Fitzgerald et al., 1995). Measures of sexual aggression tend to focus on assaultive acts, primarily rape, that were often completed through the use of force, threat of force, coercion, or incapacitation (e.g., Forbes & Adams-Curtis, 2001; Testa et al., 2019). It is important to note, however, that assault may happen without the antecedents of force, threat of force, coercion, or incapacitation; likewise, women may experience these tactics without aggression becoming sexually assaultive. Further, these behaviors may target body parts that are not seen as “sexual” or “private” by the person who experienced the unwanted touch (e.g., their back or hair; Thoresen & Øverlien, 2009). All of this has led to several important areas of confusion in the assessment of sexual misconduct: Whose perspective determines whether an interaction is sexual? Who determines which body parts are relevant to an experience of sexual misconduct? Where is the line between “mild” and “severe” assault (and who determines this)?

College Settings

College campuses may be prime locations for sexual misconduct due to students’ limited sex education, gendered messages about sex and intimacy, and the prevalence of parties and alcohol consumption (Muehlenhard et al., 2016). Furthermore, men’s sexual aggression and women’s sexual submission may be viewed as a typical part of the heterosexual relationship dynamic and therefore enacted by students (see Gavey, 2005). Researchers have identified college parties as particularly dangerous in terms of sexual violence (Abbey, 2016; Armstrong et al., 2006; Ford & Soto-Marquez, 2016).

As a result, we sought to understand “mild” sexual assault and aggression in the context of college students’ social lives, specifically in settings where alcohol is consumed (e.g., parties and bars).

Drinking alcohol and socializing where alcohol is served are normative experiences for many U.S. college students (Bersamin et al., 2012; Wei et al., 2010); however, data on students’ social habits are primarily informed by alcohol drinkers rather than both drinkers and nondrinkers. Based on data collected at 14 California universities, approximately 61% of students had consumed alcohol within the previous four weeks (Marzell et al., 2015). Of the students who consumed alcohol, more than half of the women attended a Greek¹ (58%) or off-campus party (56%), or a pub/bar/restaurant (55%) during the past academic semester. Students reported attending Greek parties an average of 5.2 times per semester, off-campus parties an average of 5.6 times per semester, and bars/restaurants an average of 5.8 times per semester (Bersamin et al., 2012). Students indicated that the average number of people in attendance in each setting was approximately 66 people, 24 people, and 50 people, respectively (Marzell et al., 2015). Of these settings, Greek parties were the most commonly attended by students under the age of 21 (66%). Nearly all students (99%) reported that pubs/bars/restaurants enforced the legal drinking age, so these settings may be more common for students over the age of 21. The prevalence of students who attend drinking settings may be higher than reported due to the exclusion of nondrinkers.

“Mild” Sexual Assault and Aggression

Turning to the more common and more “mild” forms of sexual assault (i.e., those without force, threat of force, inebriation, or coercion), Krebs et al. (2016) asked U.S. college students to indicate if they had experienced unwanted touching or grabbing of “sexual body parts” (p. 19). They found that being touched or grabbed was a tactic used in 85% of all sexual assault incidents, compared with the 25% that involved incapacitation and 24% that involved physical force. These results suggest that researchers’ emphasis on force and incapacitation – and not allowing for reports of more typical behavior – minimizes and distorts the full picture of campus sexual assault.

Studies in this field have examined sexual assault and aggression as they relate to alcohol consumption and public drinking settings. Pino and Johnson-Johns (2009) found that approximately half of U.S. college women ($N = 2,254$) reported having experienced an “unwanted sexual advance” due to “other students’ drinking” (p. 255) at least once since the start of the school year. Graham, Bernards, Abbey, et al. (2014) asked young women, as they left a Canadian city’s bar district, if (1) someone touched them or did something

¹“Greek” and “fraternity” in this article refer to social organizations present on many U.S. university campuses that use Greek letters in their names. Membership in a fraternity (exclusively for men) or sorority (exclusively for women) is an indicator of social status and the Greek system often plays a large role in U.S. universities’ social scenes. The Greek system, and fraternity subcultures in particular, have been identified as contributors to campus sexual violence and rape culture (see Armstrong et al., 2006; Jozkowski & Wiersma-Mosley, 2017).

else sexual that they did not want to happen and (2) if someone persistently pursued them after they expressed disinterest (forms of sexual assault and aggression, respectively). More than half of the women in the exit survey ($N = 114$) reported unwanted touching or unwelcome persistence that night and 18% reported experiencing both. This study's distinction between unwanted touch and unwelcome persistence offers a useful model for further investigation. These findings highlight that approximately half of college women may experience some form of "mild" sexual assault or aggression in a given school year and that this may be a particular issue when women are in social drinking spaces.

Field research conducted within college parties, bars, and clubs has allowed researchers to observe women's bodies being groped, slapped, and touched, sometimes singularly and other times repeatedly (Graham, Bernards, Osgood, et al., 2014). Incidents documented by observers involved dancing (often grinding), either occurring as a man attempted to dance with a woman or during consensual dancing (Graham, Bernards, Osgood, et al., 2014; Graham et al., 2010). Ronen's (2010) observational research focused entirely on grinding at college parties on a U.S. campus and the author argued that grinding functions as a specific site of aggressive and nonconsensual contact if it is viewed by students as a direct route to further sexual interaction. Furthermore, Ronen (2010) reported the phenomenon of "surprise initiation" (p. 368), in which men approach women from behind and begin thrusting or rubbing against them without providing an opportunity for verbal or nonverbal consent. Interviews and focus groups with U.S. women over the past 25 years about assaultive and aggressive behaviors at bars and clubs corroborate these observational findings (e.g., Parks & Miller, 1997). U.S. college women have reported nonconsensual grabbing and grinding, as well as men's persistence when they declined to dance or drink with them (Becker & Tinkler, 2015). Further, U.S. women reported that these experiences were typical, saying unwanted touching "happens all the time" (Kavanaugh, 2013, p. 29) and that they "get touched or grabbed probably about once a week" (p. 30).

In their ethnographic study of U.S. college women, Armstrong et al. (2006) detailed aggressive behaviors that may precede or enable sexual assault. They identified how young men work individually and in groups to facilitate possible sexual assault at fraternity parties: heightening levels of intoxication, using alcohol as a lure to persuade women to leave friends for private spaces, and physically preventing women from leaving by blocking doorways or refusing transportation. These tactics illustrate the ways in which men may not be deterred by women's lack of consent, verbal and nonverbal cues, resistance, or outright refusal. Though these behaviors may not necessarily result in sexual assault, their commonness may play a role in normalizing forms of assault and aggression and thus deserve consideration when accounting for campus climate.

Current Study

Our aim was to understand the form and frequency of "mild" sexual assault and aggression that women experienced in their

college social life. We collected focus group data with women college students ($N = 36$) from a Large State University in the Midwest United States (referred to below as LSUM). We opted to use focus groups because we aimed to capture how women shared their experiences with other women, rather than just an interviewer, which we anticipated might create too much formality and result in less informal information being shared. This research design decision relied on the group structure to encourage women to report experiences that might seem too "mild," obvious, or simple in another research design.

Three years earlier in 2015, the LSUM conducted a sexual misconduct climate survey to assess the incidence and prevalence of on- and off-campus sexual assault of current undergraduate and graduate students. This decision followed (1) the "Dear Colleague Letter" from the Department of Education Office for Civil Rights (Ali, 2011) that reminded institutions of their responsibility to address and prevent sexual assault under Title IX, (2) the amendment to the Clery Act (Violence Against Women Reauthorization Act, 2013) that expanded the crimes universities were required to report, and (3) the Not Alone report (White House Task Force to Protect Students from Sexual Assault, 2014) that recommended universities conduct climate surveys to better understand campus sexual violence.

In the 2015 LSUM climate survey, 3,000 of the university's approximately 45,000 undergraduate and graduate students were asked to report their experiences of sexual assault, ranging from nonconsensual touching to nonconsensual penetration. During the first phase of data collection, students were invited to participate via e-mail and were entered into a sweepstakes-style incentive where 1-in-300 would receive a 100 USD American Express gift card. For completing the survey, two-thirds were compensated with 15 USD and one-third were compensated with 30 USD in cash. During the second and final phase, trained interviewers used telephone and face-to-face contact methods to encourage students to complete the survey online; incentive offers remained the same during this phase. The weighted response rate was approximately 67% ($N = 1,891$). In the Large State University in the Midwest's (2015) published report on the study, it reported that women, undergraduates, students from underrepresented racial/ethnic backgrounds, Greek life members, and bisexual, lesbian, and gay students were at higher risk of sexual assault compared with their counterparts. Consistent with climate surveys at other higher education institutions, approximately 23% of undergraduate women at LSUM reported experiencing some form of sexual assault in the 12 months prior to the survey.

Given the evidence that women's experiences of sexual assault may be more varied than these measures account for, we sought to examine the survey measure more closely for potential measurement gaps. For example, the LSUM survey language identified nonconsensual touching as including "removing some of your clothes" and/or "fondling, kissing, and rubbing." It is not clear, however, whether this phrasing is, or would be interpreted to be, inclusive of grabbing, groping, slapping, or other related acts. In addition, the survey item specified nonconsensual touching as involving particular

“private areas” (i.e., “lips, breast/chest, crotch or butt”), which raises questions surrounding limiting sexual assault to a few areas, rather than relying on the interpretation of the person being touched. Lastly, the LSUM survey limited its items about assault to specific circumstances, including verbal coercion, incapacitation, inebriation, force, and/or threat of force. As a result, the assaultive incidents that do not fall within these parameters (e.g., touching the hips, waist, stomach, or legs; groping without prior force, threat of force, incapacitation, or coercion) remain unknown or inaccurately recorded. If climate survey participants indicated “yes” to any circumstance for any form of assault, they were asked to enter how many times the assault occurred in an open text box. Given the findings presented above that approximately half of young women report “mild” sexual assault and/or aggression (Graham, Bernards, Abbey, et al., 2014; Pino & Johnson-Johns, 2009), we wondered whether survey participants may have relied on general estimates due to incidents being more than they could (or wanted to) count. Furthermore, we worried that survey language also “teaches” young people a limited (and legally incorrect) definition of sexual assault (McClelland & Fine, 2008).

With this set of concerns in mind, we designed a focus group study to assess the range of frequency and forms of “mild” assaultive and aggressive experiences. For the purpose of our study, we refer to physical actions (e.g., groping) as assaultive and nonphysical actions (e.g., pressuring) as aggressive. In this article, we describe women’s accounts of sexually assaultive and aggressive behavior at parties and bars and consider these behaviors in the context of the LSUM survey items in order to examine potential measurement gaps.

Method

Recruitment

Focus group participants were recruited using information sheets given out in introductory psychology classes, fliers posted in campus buildings, and e-mails sent through the LSUM Registrar’s Office. Potential participants ($N = 724$) were directed to a screening questionnaire to determine if they were eligible for the study. Participants were considered eligible if they: (1) identified as a woman, (2) were a current first-year or senior undergraduate student, (3) had only attended one postsecondary institution (i.e., were not a transfer student), (4) had lived in the U.S. since at least age 12, and (5) attended parties of 40 or more people hosted by university students “almost every weekend” or “every weekend.” We focused on college women’s descriptions of experiences at college parties and bars because researchers have previously found that “mild” sexual assault and aggression are common occurrences in social drinking spaces (e.g., Graham, Bernards, Osgood, et al., 2014; Kavanaugh, 2013). Our aim was not to recruit a representative sample of LSUM, but rather to over-sample women who “opted in” to large social events. Our rationale for this decision was to include individuals who had a greater number of potentially relevant experiences. Our aim in this focus group study was to examine the widest range of “mild” assaultive and aggressive

behaviors, not to study their prevalence in the population. Furthermore, we wanted to include students who had been socialized from a young age within the U.S. about college parties and in order to decrease institutional comparisons, we included only students who attended one college.

As part of the screening questionnaire, respondents who met the eligibility criteria ($n = 186$) were informed that the focus group conversation would likely touch on topics related to “social and sexual interactions between men and women” in order to avoid participants’ surprise and potential discomfort during focus group discussions. Respondents who indicated they were still interested in participating ($n = 176$) were asked to report their racial/ethnic identity, sexual identity, parents’ education status, and sorority membership status, and to provide an e-mail address at which they could be contacted for scheduling purposes. Eligible respondents were assigned a study identification number and emailed from a university-affiliated research study e-mail to initiate scheduling. Fourteen respondents did not provide an e-mail address and thus could not be reached for scheduling. Of the 162 respondents emailed, 97 (59.9%) could not be scheduled during available times, 22 individuals (13.6%) were non-responders, and seven participants (4.3%) were scheduled but did not show up. In total, 36 women participated in six groups (3–8 people in each group). Only one of the focus groups included three participants; six women were scheduled but three did not show up.

We used a purposive sampling design; focus groups were organized around year in school and racial/ethnic identity, rather than around those who signed up first. Three groups were designated for first-year students and three groups for senior students. This design decision was made in order to examine potential differences between how the two cohorts describe their experiences with sexual assault and aggression at the beginning and end of their college careers; this comparative analysis is not included in the current article. Within the first-year and senior groups, there was a group designated for Women of Color, a group for White women, and a group for Women of Color and White women. We organized groups this way to provide a space for Women of Color where they would not be silenced, quieted, or excluded from group discussion by White participants (see Sesko & Biernat, 2010). Participants were not made aware that there were different types of groups and so were not asked which type of group they would prefer to be in.

Procedure

Each group was audio-recorded and included a facilitator and note-taker. Facilitators posed questions and probed participants’ responses. Note-takers documented the order in which participants spoke and as many verbal and nonverbal cues and group interactions as possible over the course of the focus group (e.g., nodding, laughter, eyebrow-raising). These notes were then added to the transcription for analysis. The four groups that included White women were facilitated by the White primary author (Papp) and a White undergraduate research assistant as note-taker. The two groups comprised of Women of Color were led by a trained researcher and note-taker who both identified as Women of Color.

Focus group discussions lasted 60–70 minutes. Participants were each compensated with 15 USD in cash immediately following the focus group.

The audio data were transcribed verbatim, including false starts, utterances, and fillers, such as “um” and “like.” Transcription was intended to capture participants’ natural speaking styles and to identify instances in which participants appeared to have more difficulty talking about their experiences. Transcriptions also included notes about verbal and nonverbal behaviors and interactions that the note-takers observed during the groups (e.g., smiling), as well as the group facilitators’ impressions of each group (e.g., mood, questions that did or did not generate conversation). These data offered information about group dynamics and insight for improving the focus group protocol. Transcriptions were completed by the first author and three trained research assistants and checked for accuracy by multiple readers.

Because talking about assaultive and aggressive experiences might bring up memories and feelings associated with traumatic incidents, we provided participants with additional resources. At the close of each focus group, we handed out information sheets with local and national resources related to mental health, sexual assault, and sexual health. In addition, we identified three local service providers recommended by the university’s sexual assault advocacy center. If a student who had participated in the study sought services within six months of study participation, we offered to pay for the cost of her first session. Clinicians’ information was included on the resource sheet, with directions to bring the sheet or identify as a research participant in the study to receive an initial session at no cost. To our knowledge, no participants sought services from the providers on our resource list.

Sample

Participants were between the ages of 18 and 22 ($M = 19.92$, $SD = 1.57$). The sample included first-year students ($n = 19$; 52.8%) and seniors ($n = 17$; 47.2%). See Table 1 for sample demographics. Individual demographics are provided in the online supplementary materials; pseudonyms in the supplementary material and the text were assigned by the authors.

Measures

In addition to the focus group design, several demographic measures were used to determine potential participants’ eligibility and to describe the final sample. All measures were completed as part of the screening questionnaire.

Age

Participants were asked to report their age in years.

University Status

Participants were asked if they were a current undergraduate student at the university (*Yes, No*), their year in school (*First year, Sophomore, Junior, Senior*), and if they were a transfer student or attended another post-secondary institution (*Yes, No*).

Table 1. Sample demographics ($N = 36$).

Demographics	n (%)
Racial/ethnic identity	
Asian or Asian Pacific Islander	5 (13.9%)
Black or African American	5 (13.9%)
Latino/a/x	4 (11.1%)
White or Caucasian	26 (72%)
Another racial/ethnic identity	0
Sexual identity	
Heterosexual or straight	31 (86.1%)
Mostly heterosexual or straight	3 (8.3%)
Gay or lesbian	1 (2.8%)
Mostly gay or lesbian	0
Bisexual	3 (8.3%)
Asexual	0
Queer	0
Another sexual identity	0
Primary parent or guardian’s highest level of education	
A few years of high school or less	1 (2.8%)
High school graduate	0
Some college	1 (2.8%)
Junior college/trade school graduate	1 (2.8%)
College/university graduate	15 (41.7%)
Post-graduate	18 (50%)
Secondary parent or guardian’s highest level of education	
A few years of high school or less	2 (5.6%)
High school graduate	4 (11.1%)
Some college	3 (8.3%)
Junior college/trade school graduate	1 (2.8%)
College/university graduate	12 (33.3%)
Post-graduate	12 (33.3%)
Missing	2 (5.6%)
Sorority membership	
No	25 (69.4%)
Yes	11 (30.6%)

Total n s for racial/ethnic identity and sexual identity add up to more than the sample N because participants could select more than one option.

Time in the U.S

Participants were asked if they had lived in the U.S. since age 12 (*Yes, No*).

Gender Identity

Participants were asked to report their current gender identity (*Woman, Man, An identity not listed here*).

Party Frequency

Participants were asked to report how frequently they attended parties where there were 40 or more people in attendance (*Never, Rarely, Sometimes, Almost every weekend, Every weekend*).

Racial/Ethnic Identity

Participants were asked to report their racial/ethnic identity (*Asian or Asian Pacific Islander, Black or African American, Latino/a/x, White or Caucasian, A race/ethnicity not listed here*), with instruction to “check all that apply.”

Sexual Identity

Participants were asked to report their current sexual identity (*Heterosexual or straight, Mostly heterosexual or straight, Gay or lesbian, Mostly gay or lesbian, Bisexual, Asexual, Queer, A sexuality not listed here*), with instruction to “check all that apply.”

Socioeconomic Status

Participants’ socioeconomic status was collected using the primary and secondary parent or guardian’s highest education

level as an indicator (*A few years of high school or less, High school graduate, Some college, Junior college/trade school graduate, College/university graduate, Post-graduate*).

Sorority Membership

Participants were asked if they were currently a member of a university sorority (*Yes, No, In the process of joining, Not currently but I was during my time at the university, Other*).

Focus Group Questions

All groups began with the facilitator asking participants where and how often they “go out” (attend parties or go to bars). In order to begin the group conversation about how participants have observed men’s sexual interest, questions included, “How do guys show they want to hook up with girls at parties?” In order to begin the group conversation about how participants managed men’s sexual interest, questions included, “How do you turn guys down when they’re just looking for someone to hook up with and you’re not interested?” In order to begin the conversation about participants’ experiences with confusing or troubling interactions, questions included, “Have you ever seen things at parties that surprised you?” The focus group question guide is provided in the online supplementary materials.

Data Analysis

Using a modified RADaR (Rigorous and Accelerated Data Reduction; Watkins, 2017) approach, data were reduced to conversations on a specific topic within a single group. We collated participants’ contributions on a given topic within the larger focus group conversation. In the analysis for this article, we focused on conversations that highlighted experiences of assault and aggression at college parties and bars (e.g., responding to men’s advances). The current article centers on descriptions of “mild” sexual assault and aggression experiences across the six groups in order to identify general trends in how these experiences were described, interpreted, and understood by college women.

We used directed content analysis to code each conversation (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). We developed three codes: (1) “mild” physical assault, (2) “mild” nonphysical aggression, and (3) frequency of assaultive and aggressive behavior (see Table 2 for code descriptions and examples). Together, these codes were designed to help us identify women’s experiences, with a focus on their physical bodies, the manipulation and negotiation tactics they were exposed to, and their impressions of how often these kinds of experiences occurred.

“Mild” Physical Assault

We coded references to women’s bodies that were explicit (e.g., “my waist”) and implicit (e.g., “grinding on you”) in order to understand the role that physical bodies played in interactions with men at large parties and bars. This decision was based on prior research documenting how women experience unwanted touching in social spaces (Graham, Bernards, Osgood, et al., 2014; Graham et al., 2010; Kavanaugh, 2013; Ronen, 2010).

“Mild” Nonphysical Aggression

We coded participants’ interpretations of how men expressed sexual intent at college parties and bars in ways that reflected a disregard for consent and wantedness. This included, for example, women’s descriptions of being followed around a venue, men ignoring women’s direct (i.e., verbal) or indirect (i.e., body language) expressions of “no,” and when they described feeling pressured to engage in sexual activity.

Frequency of “Mild” Assaultive and Aggressive Behavior

Because one of the major aims of the study included documenting how women interpret the frequency of “mild” assaultive and aggressive experiences, we coded when women described how often these experiences occurred. There were few instances where exact counts were provided (e.g., “once”); more common were women’s use of general indicators of frequency (e.g., “sometimes” and “a lot of times”). We coded for both exact counts and general indicators of frequency.

The first author reviewed and edited each transcript against the recording, then reduced, coded, and revisited the transcripts, at each step refining the coding process. The analysis was conducted by the first author; we used a single-coder approach to allow for researcher subjectivity in coding and interpretation (Terry et al., 2017). Once the relevant conversations had been coded, the first author reviewed all conversations to ensure that codes were applied consistently across similar accounts. Contributions relevant to “mild” assault and aggression were compiled into one document to eliminate duplicate responses and to better identify commonalities between women’s accounts across conversations and groups.

Results

Our results highlight the characteristics of “mild” sexual assault and aggression, as well as how often women experienced this kind of mistreatment during their time in college. We present both individual and multi-participant contributions to illustrate

Table 2. Codes, descriptions, and exemplary excerpts from focus group study.

Code	Description	Example
“Mild” Physical Assault	Descriptions of women’s bodies being touched, both explicit (e.g., “my waist”) and implicit (e.g., “grinding on you”).	“... he, like, immediately starts kissing me, which I had no intention of doing that” (Bailey, 21 years old)
“Mild” Nonphysical Aggression	Descriptions of how men directly or indirectly express sexual intention in ways that disregard women’s indications of consent and wantedness, such as by the use of persistence (i.e., not taking “no” for an answer), guilt, or pressure.	“... they don’t really care if your body language is, like, ‘go away’” (Rebecca, 19 years old)
Frequency of “Mild” Assaultive and Aggressive Behavior	Indications of how often described or similar behavior occurs, provided indirectly (e.g., as part of an account, in response to someone’s account) or directly (i.e., as the result of being asked about frequency or commonness). This includes both exact (e.g., “once”) and general (e.g., “sometimes”) indicators of frequency.	“... the whole, like, being pressed up against, that’s common” [Ashley (18 years old) nods] (Amy, 18 years old)

the variability in and volume of women's experiences. One of our main research aims concerned the accurate measurement of these experiences; with this in mind, we consider whether the "mild" assaults could have been reported on the LSU climate survey to illustrate the potential limits of survey language. Climate survey language is quoted and italicized (e.g., "*crotch or butt*") to distinguish it from participants' contributions. We used the qualitative descriptions to reflect back on the climate survey language in order to evaluate the potential for important details to be lost.

"Mild" Physical Assault

During the focus groups, women drew on personal experiences, incidents they witnessed, and incidents they heard about when describing accounts of "mild" forms of sexual assault. They talked about nonconsensual and unwanted grinding, kissing, hugging, groping, and men's habit of touching women "on the hips or even the butt" (Kara, 22 years old) as they walked by them. Women described their bodies in interactions that involved dancing or grinding and talked about surprise initiations ("I do hate the back sneak-up and then start grinding on you randomly"; Lucy, 21 years old ["Ugh"; group agreement]). Participants lamented some men's belief that consensual dancing or grinding is "an automatic yes to, like, putting their hands wherever they want all over you" (Chloe, 18 years old). Indeed, three women in the study described men putting their hands into their shirt or pants without consent while dancing with them. Participants also recounted nonconsensual sexual contact that occurred off the dance floor. For example, a first-year woman mentioned three different men grabbed her buttocks at one party. In the following excerpt, Tara, Emily, and Lucy (all 21 years old) discussed deliberate, unwanted, and nonconsensual touching under the guise of limited space:

Tara: Um, I will say if I don't know the guy prior to the party, like it's not a guy that I'm actually, like, acquaintances with, and he's, like, touching me and you didn't ask permission to touch me, that's- that's a major red flag. That's where it's like, "Okay." You know, at least some guys ask you first.

Emily: Or, like, I hate it when guys just, like, literally want to get past you and you know you can just, like, go past them [sighs; Lucy: Oh my god] but instead, like, they grab your waist [Lucy: Oh my god, I hate that.] and then go past you. And I'm just, like, you could have literally just gone around me but instead you have to hold me and then, like ... [Lucy: I hate that so much.] I'm- I'm like, this happens, like, every time. [Tara: They do that on purpose; Lucy: It's so unnecessary.] Don't touch me.

Tara: [Using a bottle and a pen to simulate individuals moving past one another.] It's like this is me, well, no, this is me [laughter] and this is the guy, and there's, like, all this space. So, "Excuse me, I have to get past you." [Laughter] Like, you're not- you're not slick. [Laughter; Lucy: Yeah, so true.]

Turning to the LSU climate survey and the assessment of mild sexual assault experiences, we interpret a high potential for this kind of behavior to be overlooked within the survey. In the LSU's survey the nonconsensual touching item named specific types of contact ("*fondled, kissed, or rubbed*") the "*lips, breast/chest, crotch, or butt*" or "*removed some of*

your clothing"), and specific circumstances (verbal coercion, force or threat of force, and incapacitation). However, reflecting on some of the details above, there are other important interactions that are relevant to the college experience and the experiences of women in public spaces, including typical nonconsensual touching that is imagined to be unproblematic by those engaging in it. Women in the groups consistently named this kind of touching as unwanted and nonconsensual, but also as expected. They varied in whether they imagined this kind of touch in public spaces could be stopped or should be understood as the price of going out while in college.

In the focus groups, only one woman's experience might have "counted" in the parameters set by the climate survey. She described being at a party when a man approached her, hit her phone out of her hand, and attempted to remove her clothes:

[T]he guy that, like, grabbed me and tried to pull down my pants ... it was literally in, like, the main, like, living room area, and just, like, against the corner, 'cause, like, I was by myself and so I was just kinda texting a friend, and he, like, sort of, like, came up towards me, and, like, knocked the phone out of my hand, and, like, tried to, like, move my clothes ... (Alondra, 18 years old)

This account met the climate survey parameters regarding the act ("*removing some of your clothes*") and circumstance ("*using force*"). However, it is not clear if Alondra would have interpreted the climate survey language around force ("*holding you down with their body weight, pinning your arms, or having a weapon*") as applicable to her experience. Importantly, she stated that she fled the party with "the feeling of, like, this is what it's like to be a girl on campus." The likelihood that students will formally disclose following a sexual assault are low, and more "severe" assaults (e.g., involving a weapon, physical injury) are more likely to be reported than those that are "mild" (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2014; Sabina & Ho, 2014). However, incidents are not always "mild" to those who experience them, even if they are not, or cannot be, reported to the university.

"Mild" Nonphysical Aggression

Women in the focus groups also described men's use of nonphysical persistence and deception to facilitate sexual overtures. Examples included being followed around parties and bars, typically after trying to avoid a man's advances. Taylor (19 years old) described what persistence looked like for her and her friends:

If a guy came and tried to dance with her and, like, she didn't want to then, like, she'd kind of try to, like, step away or, like, move to a different part of the dance floor, but then, like, he might follow and still, like- like, persevere. Like, he'd try to keep dancing with her despite the fact that she didn't want to. So it's kind of, like, just moving around, but he still follows.

One participant recounted challenging a man who was following her ("... he kept following me around, like telling me that [my body was 'thick as hell'] and I was like, 'I think it's, one, obnoxious that you think you can comment on my body and, two, like, you keep doing it'"; Kara, 22 years old). Other women described becoming uncomfortable to the point at which they left the venue altogether ("I tried to like, leave,

and then he would, like, follow us and then there was a point we went, like, upstairs, like, the second floor and then he followed me up there and then just still tried to, like, dance with me ... it just continued and then we just decided to leave"; Jordan, 21 years old). In these scenarios, we learn that women are confronted with two undesirable options: go to a party or bar knowing they may have to leave as a result of aggression or limit their social lives in an attempt to avoid such experiences altogether.

Direct persistence ranged from less obvious, brief encounters to incidents of repeated sexual harassment. One participant recounted several experiences in which men blocked her path in attempts to start a conversation ("I'll be walking past the bar ... someone will get in my way and, like, start trying to talk to me"; Phoebe, 22 years old). When women declined men's offers (e.g., to dance, drink, or go to a more private location), they reported men's increasing persistence, including questioning and angry reactions ("... he mentioned, like, the common 'Well, why are you here?' Like, 'Why the fuck did you come here if you don't want to dance?"; Tara, 21 years old). Other women described repeated requests (e.g., nagging, guilting) to dance or drink. In particular, Michelle (19 years old) described "one of the most uncomfortable" experiences she had during her first year, which involved both "mild" assault and aggression: a man she knew repeatedly insisted she drink stronger alcohol than the beer she ordered, eventually wrapping his arm around her waist and pulling her close to him while he "kept trying to, like, change [her] mind and, like, wouldn't let [her] go." Despite Michelle's attempts to justify her drink choices and efforts to be "abrupt" with him, he abated only when another man stepped in to help her.

Across the focus groups, women described how their boundaries were not respected and were, instead, treated as negotiable. Women reported situations in which men expected attention because they had unwittingly crossed a line that indicated they were interested, such as being present at a venue, talking with a man, accepting a drink from a man, dancing with a man, and even dancing with other men ("... he was like, 'No, come on, I've seen you dance with other people, like, dance with me"; Ashley, 18 years old). Women shared concerns that if they accepted a man's non-sexual invitation (e.g., to go somewhere private to use drugs) he would expect sexual interaction in return. Indeed, one woman recounted accepting a man's offer of drugs at a party, only to realize once in his room that he had lied to get her alone so that he could initiate sexual activity. These concerns are reasonable given prior research that has documented men's interpretations of sexual consent or intent as including any alcohol or drug consumption as well as accepting an offer to go somewhere private (Jozkowski et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2020).

The collective understanding of this risk contributed to an atmosphere in which women felt they owed men something; women in the focus groups reported that men's flirtation and persistence were often difficult to interpret and navigate. Lucy described an early experience in college where she learned that when a man buys her a drink, he expects something in return. In her description she includes both the exchange as well as her own

emotional response to being socialized into what might be imagined as a fairly mundane bar experience. However, it allows us to see how this kind of exchange is something that young women are asked to learn as part of their regular social landscape.

I remember, like, when I was an underclassman and I went to a bar and someone bought me a drink, I, like, felt so bad and they were like, 'Can you dance?' like, 'Come on, dance with me, like, I bought you a drink,' and I was like, 'Okay,' and then I was so uncomfortable that whole night. And I was like- I felt so unsafe and, like, really scared and pressured and I felt so uncomfortable. (Lucy, 21 years old)

In our study, young women recounted how men would persist (Ashley, 18 years old, said, "They keep persevering"; Michelle, 19 years old, said, "... he just, like, kept trying to, like, change my mind"; and Hannah, 19 years old, said, "... he was so pushy about, like, separating me away from everyone"). In the LSUM climate survey, participants were asked if they had experienced unwanted sexual contact as a result of verbal coercion, described as "*continually verbally pressuring you after you said you didn't want to? This includes telling lies, threatening to end the relationship, threatening to spread rumors about you, showing displeasure, criticizing your sexuality or attractiveness, or getting angry but not using physical force.*" Most of the experiences would not fall within the parameters set out by the climate survey because they did not result in nonconsensual physical touch, despite how often we heard of women being "*verbally pressured after [they] said [they] didn't want to.*" In our study, women described men who, as a result of being turned down, were "*showing displeasure*" ("... they're always like, 'Oh, come on, like, why not?' Or, like, 'What did I do wrong?"; Julia, 21 years old) and "*getting angry but not using physical force*" ("... they're just, like, getting angry and they're like, 'Well, you're here [so you should dance with us]"; Gabriela, 22 years old). We do not know if the women in our study would describe their experiences as sexual assault or aggression; however, we question whether the climate survey items as written would have adequately facilitated reporting of the types of assaultive and aggressive behavior they experienced.

Estimating Frequency of Assaultive and Aggressive Behavior

When focus group participants reported how often they experienced "mild" sexual assault and aggression, only two women provided an actual frequency count: Alondra (18 years old) had experienced a man trying to "physically grab [her] and do something" twice at parties during the six months since she had started college, and Wren (18 years old) once had to "throw an elbow back" due to unusually aggressive, unwanted grinding. More commonly, participants relied on general estimates. For example, when dancing, surprise initiations by men were reported to be "pretty common." One participant said she expected to "get danced on twice in an hour" (Sydney, 22 years old), especially later in the night. One participant estimated "at least one instance" of groping every time she goes to parties (Isobel, 18 years old), and another participant reported being groped "75% of the time" (Sophie, 18 years old). Another participant appraised the situation differently, stating that assaultive and aggressive

behavior comprised about 10% of the night or less, a “small chunk” (Elaine, 22 years old).

Women more often estimated the frequency, or commonness, of assaultive and aggressive behavior using general terms such as “a lot” and “sometimes.” For example, unwanted touching was “something small that happens a lot” (Laura, 18 years old), and one participant reported that she had been in “a lot of situations” in which a man “put his body on [her]” (Jordan, 21 years old). In the following excerpt, Erin explained what “creepy, grope-y” behavior entails, and other participants indicated that this was a common experience:

Erin (22 years old): ... one time I was at a bar with my friends, and this guy just came up and almost, like, started- like, he was, like, dancing, but it was, like, a creepy, grope-y way and my best friend literally looked at him and was like, “Who are you? [laughter] What are you doing?” and he got the hint. [laughs; Angela (21 years old) makes a face; Julia (21 years old) laughs at “Who are you?”]

Facilitator: Would you define “creepy, grope-y way”? For the sake of science. [laughter]

Erin (22 years old): ... really drunk, like, slurred words, grabbing your body, um ... yeah, way too close, no personal space, usually there’s no lead up, it’s like, he’s not gonna like- if he’s being creepy and grope-y, he’s not gonna, like, ask you how you are, like how’s your day, like, he’s just gonna go for it. [laughter; nods; smiles]

Facilitator: How common is that? [laughter and agreement; quick, overlapping responses]

Very

Very common

I think the majority

I experienced that, like, this weekend

Yeah

Women indicated the frequency of these behaviors often without an accompanying numerical value, a reasonable strategy given the prevalence of these forms of assault and aggression. Instead, they resorted to discussing how the occurrence of these behaviors is obvious, “assumed” (Noelle, 22 years old), or impossible to count (or even remember). In the LSUM climate survey, participants were asked to enter into an open text box how many times a specific kind of assault had occurred. This item is unlikely to produce a precise count of “mild” incidents, highlighting that such climate surveys are not designed to capture these experiences. As a result, more common types of “mild” sexual assault and aggression may continue to be obscured.

Discussion

Important guiding questions in this study concerned who determines what counts as sexual, what body parts are relevant to these determinations, and where the line is between “mild” and “severe.” We argue that the inclusion of “mild” sexual assault and aggression in assessments of campus sexual assault is key to identifying patterns and, perhaps most

importantly, documenting the routine mistreatment of women and the normalization of this behavior on college campuses.

We found that college women experienced both physical and nonphysical attempts to overtly or covertly test, disregard, and manipulate their bodily boundaries at parties and bars. The experiences reported by participants involved unwanted and/or nonconsensual touching (e.g., groping, grinding) and varying forms of coercion (e.g., pressuring, repeated requests or demands, anger, following), though not always together. They described a wide range of interactions that happened a lot (e.g., unwanted grinding, groping, pressure to drink or dance) and those that happened less often (e.g., using deception to isolate women). Given that these behaviors were discussed in relation to “how guys show they want to hook up with girls at parties,” college women may interpret these incidents as a form of annoying-but-harmless flirtation, executed within a specific context, aimed at achieving some form of sexual interaction. However, these behaviors illustrate an unequal power dynamic in which men act in ways that suggest dangerous entitlement to women’s bodies, indifference toward (non)consent and (un)wantedness, and neglect of verbal and nonverbal cues.

Our findings illustrate needed details about these routine experiences and help us understand how women think about, evaluate, and share the details of their social lives and the associated customary behaviors. We pursued this question about the form and frequency of “mild” sexual assault and aggression with an eye toward how the commonness of such experiences, when combined with restrictions on what is “reportable,” may be obscured in campus climate assessments. Can researchers expect a student to report their experiences on a university-sponsored survey when being randomly groped is “a Thursday night” (Erin, 22 years old)? How many “Thursday nights” are accumulated throughout college? And importantly, how, when, and why do these “mild” experiences become so mundane that they no longer occur to young women to imagine as anything but “normal”?

The sheer scale and frequency at which “mild” sexual assault and aggression occur may contribute to underreporting, while survey language may further prevent mundane experiences from being shared. When researchers limit which acts, body parts, and circumstances are “relevant” to understanding campus sexual assault, they may perpetuate the diminishment (and erasure) of women’s experiences. In our study, accounts of unwanted touching did not include threats of force, incapacitation, or inebriation; they rarely included verbal coercion and only one woman described unwanted touching as a result of the use of force. In fact, most of the aggressive tactics described in our study did not result in assault. As a result, the events described above would likely go unreported or, at best, inaccurately recorded on the LSUM climate survey, despite prevailing as a critical component of the social climate at the university. These experiences shape when and where women go to socialize, exclude them from some settings, and require they consider the likelihood of experiencing assault and aggression when making plans. Important aspects of women’s social and sexual experiences

may thus be overlooked if common forms of assault and forms of aggression that do not result in assault are not captured by researchers and institutions seeking to address campus sexual misconduct.

“Mild” mistreatment has the ability to transform what kind of treatment we come to expect and accept from others (McClelland et al., 2016). “Mild” instances of mistreatment are anything but insignificant or trivial, even if we are assured that they are “no big deal,” or even if they feel inconsequential in the moment. Frequent, yet discriminatory, messages accumulate and play a meaningful role in shaping what we believe we deserve or expect from others (McClelland et al., 2016; Nadal, 2018). Working within a framework of intimate justice (McClelland, 2010, 2014), we are mindful of the implications for women’s sense of entitlement and deservingness when developed under unjust conditions, such as those in which sexual assault and aggression have become typical and even expected. This research both adds to the literature addressing “mild” violations and calls for continued research on this topic to best understand how women learn to expect, internalize, and normalize such incidents. Too little is known about how young women come to expect mistreatment in public spaces in general, and in college more specifically.

Considering “mild” mistreatment in an intimate justice framework (McClelland, 2010) acknowledges that the ordinary has the power to influence what we imagine and feel we deserve for ourselves, publicly and intimately. When “mild” assault is just “a Thursday night” in a bar and women’s physical, sexual, and personal boundaries are considered *negotiable*, we need to examine how messages influence the standard of treatment women feel they deserve in short- and long-term romantic and sexual relationships. How can feminist scholarship and advocacy be effective if it relies on women being outraged enough to notice and report what has been made unnoticeable, unreportable, *normal*, and *even deserved*? Research has illustrated that the same coercive tactics recounted by focus group participants – guilting, anger, nagging, manipulation of a sense of obligation – may follow women into their intimate lives and influence their engagement in unwanted sexual experiences (Bay-Cheng & Bruns, 2016; Bay-Cheng & Eliseo-Arras, 2008; Livingston et al., 2004). Our understanding of and resulting prevention efforts aimed at college sexual assault are limited without the ability (or opportunity) to consider how “mild” messages set the stage for women’s “severe” experiences.

Sexualized Aggression

We have referred to the nonconsensual and unwanted touching of one’s body without antecedents of force, threat of force, coercion, or incapacitation as “mild” sexual assault. When discussing pressure, coercion, and other tactics that did not include physical touch, we used the term “mild” sexual aggression. We propose the term “sexualized aggression” as an umbrella term for both “mild” assault and aggression and to encompass those behaviors that are both overt and covert. Sexualized aggression describes the part of the continuum of sexual assault that lies

between assertive (i.e., potentially benign) and forceful (i.e., physically violent) interaction, and it is inclusive of both physical and nonphysical behaviors (see Figure 1). We define sexualized aggression as those behaviors that test, manipulate, or disregard a person’s bodily boundaries. We use the term to encompass violations that have traditionally fallen outside of assessments, such as nonconsensual and unwanted touching that does not necessarily involve force, threat of force, coercion, or incapacitation, and aggressive experiences that do not result in assault.

Sexualized aggression encompasses behaviors ranging from aggressive but common forms of “flirtation” (e.g., following someone around a venue) to “mild” forms of sexual assault (e.g., groping). Some expressions of sexualized aggression are interpreted as coercive while still being non-assaultive (e.g., nagging following a rejection). Others may be considered non-coercive and non-forceful assault (e.g., nonconsensual grinding). We refer to these behaviors as “sexualized” because they communicate sexual intent to those experiencing them, despite potentially appearing non-sexual in nature: consider women’s hesitancy in accepting an invitation to a private room for non-sexual reasons (e.g., to use a bathroom) as it may carry hidden sexual expectations. This behavior is often not interpreted as involving an intent to harm or as necessarily dangerous; rather, sexualized aggression may be interpreted by those who experience it as pushy or annoying. College women navigating unfamiliar sexual territory may rely on their understanding of gendered heterosexual roles to make sense of these encounters. We are currently investigating how young women come to regard sexualized aggression as normal and expected.

“Sexualized aggression” is conceptually distinct from “sexual aggression” and “unwanted sexual attention” for reasons both practical and theoretical. “Sexual aggression” has been used as an umbrella term to describe actions ranging from fairly mundane “pick-up” tactics (e.g., attempts at separating a woman from her friends, cycling between sexual initiation and retreat; Hust & Rodgers, 2018) to rape. However, the bulk of studies using the term sexual aggression have focused on more “severe” forms of assault (e.g., Davis et al., 2015; Malamuth & Hald, 2016). “Unwanted sexual attention,” a term commonly used in the workplace sexual harassment literature (see National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine, 2018), addresses unwelcome verbal or physical sexual advances ranging from persistent requests for dates to rape. Operationalizations of

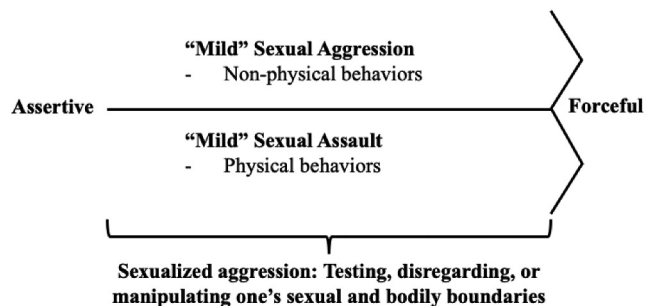


Figure 1. Theoretical model of sexualized aggression.

In this model, sexual and bodily boundaries are determined by the person experiencing sexualized aggression.

unwanted sexual attention tend to focus on overt sexual or romantic behavior, with less attention paid to covert or coded behavior (e.g., Fitzgerald et al., 1995; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine, 2018). The college social environment differs from professional environments and thus sexual assault and aggression cannot be presumed to appear, operate, or be interpreted in the same way. For example, unwanted sexual attention in the workplace may look like repeated invitations to drinks, dinner, or dates despite rejection (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine, 2018), but college women may willingly, or even excitedly, agree to a drink only for it to be weaponized against them afterward. Measuring sexualized aggression is a key aspect of campus climate, as it may contribute to an environment in which sexual assault and aggression are prevalent, yet normalized, and therefore often difficult to recognize.

Recommendations

Research and Measurement

Despite a compelling body of qualitative work providing a foundation for measurement, there has been less survey-based research assessing the range of small and otherwise typical experiences of sexualized aggression in women's social lives. As studies of sexual assault continue to be refined, there is growing awareness of several important constructs that need to be separately theorized and measured. We urge researchers, including those studying university climate, sexual assault, and sexual aggression, to assess sexualized aggression using survey, interview, focus group, and other relevant research designs. Our findings illustrate the variety and volume of sexualized aggression women may experience during their time in college. It is critical for universities to work with informed researchers to carefully identify and assess sexual violence appropriately. Through survey language and measurement decisions, institutions and researchers play active roles in establishing which experiences are (and are not) relevant to understanding sexual assault. These decisions carry a risk of communicating to many women that their assault(s) are insignificant.

While climate survey length may be a concern, as universities measure several constructs associated with sexual misconduct, understanding the relation between sexualized aggression and experiences of "severe" sexual assault is a critical next step. Universities may, for example, ask students if they have ever experienced: (1) expectation to engage in unwanted activity, (2) unwanted and nonconsensual grinding, and (3) unwanted and nonconsensual grabbing or groping. Prior research has included some items that may also be helpful as a starting point, including: (1) "A man/woman has sexually touched my body when I did not want him/her to" (Fiebert & Osburn, 2001, p. 6), (2) Has anyone "touched you in a way that made you feel uncomfortable?" (Fitzgerald et al., 1999, p. 248), and (3) Has anyone "made unwanted attempts to stroke, fondle, or kiss you?" (Fitzgerald et al., 1999, p. 248). Universities may also seek to broaden the response options related to the circumstances of sexual assault. Similar to Krebs et al. (2016) including a "touched or grabbed" tactic in their climate survey, Canan et al. (2020) revised the Sexual Experiences Survey (Koss

et al., 2007) to include the tactic "Just doing the behavior without giving me a chance to say 'no' (e.g., surprising me with the behavior)" (p. 1,077). Furthermore, we are now developing a scale to assess experiences of party and bar context-specific sexualized aggression among college women. This scale will allow for measurement of the frequency and acceptability of sexualized aggression and highlight paths for interventions into student social life.

Campus Interventions

Many students feel pressure to participate in the social culture of their university (Armstrong et al., 2006). While not all students attend parties or go to bars during their time in college, those who do may be at particular risk of experiencing the forms of sexualized aggression described by focus group participants. Given that new student orientations may require trainings on sexual assault and consent, and that these dialogues are often heavily embedded within the narratives of sexual assault and aggression we critique in this paper, the term "sexual assault" may evoke rape for these incoming students. Given the ongoing cultural conversation about sexual misconduct (e.g., #MeToo) which has primarily emphasized "severe" forms of assault, women may arrive at college expecting and prepared for related threats. In ongoing research, we are examining how women's expectations and preparations for "the worst" may influence normalization of the mundane. Institutions risk reproducing judgments about what "counts" as assault and further perpetuating normalization when they do not provide students with training that addresses (and critiques the mundanity of) sexualized aggression.

Limitations and Future Directions

Previous research has illuminated important discrepancies between what women and men may interpret as public cues of consent (e.g., accepting a drink; Jozkowski et al., 2018). Given these findings, additional research is needed to understand similarities and differences in women's and men's interpretations and communications of consent to "mild" sexual touch in social spaces. In the current study we focused on college parties and bars as highly gendered environments ideal for sexualized aggression; however, sexualized aggression is not limited to college students nor to social drinking settings. While "mild" assault and aggression take place in various public settings, such as on public transportation or in a grocery store, individuals may view the same behavior more leniently in social drinking settings as it is considered intrinsic to, unavoidable, or even desired in those spaces (Becker & Tinkler, 2015; Tinkler et al., 2018). Further research might consider how sexualized aggression manifests among other populations and in different contexts. While we have focused on more public settings, efforts to test or manipulate and acting with disregard for women's boundaries also occurs in private settings (e.g., Gutzmer et al., 2016; Jeffrey & Barata, 2016).

Though we considered whether climate survey language was clear and inclusive enough to capture "mild" experiences, we did not ask participants if they categorized their experiences as sexual assault, nor did we discuss survey language with them.

Therefore, we do not know for example, whether they would have reported their experiences within the climate survey. Nevertheless, we think our findings demonstrate that college women's experiences of sexualized aggression are unlikely to be fully or accurately revealed through measures that restrict reports, particularly those that require certain circumstances be met, such as being forced to engage in sexual activity or incapacitated and unable to consent. Furthermore, while we encourage universities' inclusion of basic (but specific) questions about sexualized aggression, we recognize that campus social life varies by institution and that common experiences at the LSU may be considered atypical elsewhere, for example, at smaller colleges or those with less dense student populations.

Some may be concerned that, by delving deeper into measuring the "mild" alongside the "severe," we risk participant fatigue or increase the potential for participant trauma, further biasing findings. Research that addresses this expansive and relatively unexplored category can, however, take many forms, including rephrasing or reframing climate survey items already in use or adding new items that specifically address sexualized aggression. The items we suggested are intended to be brief and easy to answer and thus may not induce fatigue. Prior research has found that participation in research on trauma and sexual assault yields no long-lasting negative effects and may even benefit participants (Cook et al., 2015; Edwards et al., 2009; Yeater et al., 2012). Given the pervasiveness and normality of these behaviors, we do not feel that students are at greater risk for re-traumatization as a result of answering questions on "mild" behaviors than they would be by responding to questions that address the "severe."

Conclusion

Women are often subject to "mild" forms of sexual assault and aggression; however, these brief and "mild" interactions are typically neglected in quantitative assessments of sexual assault relative to more "severe" forms of assault. We conducted a focus group study in response to a university-administered sexual misconduct climate survey and we situated participants' descriptions of typical and expected assault and aggression within the context of the language of the climate survey. Despite women's extensive and varied experiences, we determined that few, if any, would be "reportable" within the confines of the climate survey. We propose the term "sexualized aggression" to enable clearer delineation between the "mild" and "severe" behavior that may be conflated through use of terms like "sexual aggression" and "unwanted sexual advances." Sexualized aggression reflects common heterosexual flirtatious tropes in which men are sexual agents attempting to achieve sexual interaction through insistent and/or coercive means. To that end, sexualized aggression may not be interpreted as threatening or dangerous, but as a side effect of being a woman in the world. We urge higher education institutions and researchers to incorporate sexualized aggression into the ongoing conversation about campus climate and sexual assault. The number of penetrative sexual assaults that result from force and incapacitation do not, on their own, create a campus climate. Mundane injustices inform the broader climate; "severe" sexual assaults are the outcome of environments

in which women's boundaries are routinely tested, disregarded, and manipulated.

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