

Changing Conversations about Sexual Assault

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Introduction

According to the 2010 National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey, over 18% of women in the U.S. have been raped at least once, and over 40% of women have been victims of sexually violent acts other than rape¹. The prevalence of sexual assault in our society means that many women are coping with traumatic experiences, and many more live in fear of experiencing this same trauma to such an extent that women's mobility may be limited (Condon, Lieber, & Maillochon, 2007; Hilinksy 2009). The language we use to discuss sexual assault often trivializes the trauma that women have experienced and the fear they live with and has the potential to imply disbelief and blame of victims/survivors². This is evidenced through casual use of the word *rape*, use of euphemisms to describe sexual assault, and use of consensual language to describe rape. Skepticism toward survivors is embedded in our language when we use terms like "alleged" and "accuser" (Bayliff, 2013) or ask survivors questions about what they were wearing, drinking, etc. when someone assaulted them. Sentence structure often places emphasis on the survivor or victim of sexual assault instead of on the aggressor. As a result, our language

¹ The NISVS defines rape as forced or attempted penetration or completed alcohol/drug facilitated penetration. Sexual violence other than rape includes being made to penetrate another individual, sexual coercion, unwanted sexual contact, and non-contact unwanted sexual experiences.

According to the NISVS(2010), 1.4% of men in the U.S. have also been raped at least once. This piece focuses on the way that sexual assault and the language surrounding sexual assault affects women specifically because the majority of victims in sexual assault cases are women and because the Policy Center is a women-serving organization. However, victims/survivors of both genders deserve to be supported by a culture that believes, listens to, and supports them instead of trivializing and normalizing assault.

² There are differing viewpoints about whether to use the word victim or the word survivor. The word "survivor" is used to acknowledge that women who have survived sexual assault are strong and resilient, and the word "victim" is used to emphasize that a woman suffered violence at the hands of another person, instead of simply experiencing a traumatic event in which there was no agent (Bayliff, 2013)

may contribute to women feeling unsafe emotionally in our culture as they seek to cope with already being physically unsafe. Violence against women is a complex and multi-faceted issue; language is just one factor in a much broader equation. However, this piece is designed to give a cursory overview of some of the problematic aspects of our language in order to raise awareness about and encourage discussion regarding the often-unexamined value judgments inherent in our language. This piece is intended to highlight language as a factor that may influence perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors related to sexual assault. The nuances of language can contribute to unsafe/safe experiences and “feelings of safety” for girls and women.

Use of the Word “Rape”

The word *rape* is used in a variety of ways in our culture. The current legal definition of *rape* according to the FBI (2013) is “penetration, no matter how slight, of the vagina or anus with any body part or object, or oral penetration by a sex organ of another person, without the consent of the victim.” Common usage, however, is not limited to this definition. The word *rape* is sometimes used in situations with no sexually violent context. In these cases, *rape* is used to imply ownership, power, control, or dominance over an object or task. For instance, an individual might say, “I raped that exam” to convey doing well on (“dominating”) the assignment. When we speak in the reverse and say that a hard day or hard exam “raped” us, we are equating a trauma to an unpleasant but incredibly less significant event, so our use of the word is not accurately representing the severity of the crime it denotes. Using the word *rape* in contexts apart from sexual violence and outside the legal definition of rape is insensitive to survivors of assault and abuse and may desensitize individuals to the word and the severity and intensity of the crime it stands for.

In addition, the word *rape* is also frequently used in humorous contexts. “Rape jokes” seem to be a genre of comedy. While survivors themselves may choose to use humor to discuss and work through their own experiences, rape jokes are made frequently by those who have not had this experience. When rape is used as a tool to inspire laughter, this may trivialize the severity of rape and suggest that it is not the traumatic violation of personal bodily autonomy that it is. In addition, exposure to sexist humor in general has been linked in academic literature to males’ increased proclivity to rape (Thomae & Viki, 2013). As a result, rape jokes may have a multi-faceted impact. Rape jokes may be insensitive to or triggering for survivors and those who are close to survivors, and they may contribute to the rape culture that makes it okay to laugh at an issue that is both prevalent and detrimental to the health and well-being of victims. These jokes at the very least do not contribute to any kind of positive change in the current culture that allows sexual violence against women to remain so prevalent.

While some research exists on rape jokes, much less literature exists on casual use of the word *rape* and use of the word *rape* with potentially positive connotations. These issues, however, receive much attention from female bloggers and activists, so this is perhaps an area in which academia needs to catch up with activism.

Euphemistic Language to Describe Assault

Euphemistic language is frequently used in both formal and informal language regarding sexual assault cases. According to Kany, euphemisms are terms or phrases that substitute softer language for words and phrases that might be deemed inappropriate or disagreeable (as cited in Gomez, 2009). Individuals may use euphemistic language to describe sexual assault for a variety of reasons. Individuals may feel it is impolite or inappropriate to use explicitly sexual language or individuals may fear negative consequences associated with discussing sexual assault and

believe that using euphemistic language will minimize these consequences. For example, there may be incentive for subordinates and employees to use euphemistic language when reporting sexual assaults to superiors. When subordinates communicate something positive up the chain of command, they experience a low-risk high-reward communication (Lucas & Fyke, 2013). When subordinates communicate something negative up the chain of command, however, they are engaging in a low-reward high-risk exchange, and so may “soften” the information (Lucas & Fyke, 2013).

Lucas and Fyke (2013) found that euphemisms were rampant in internal conversations that took place during the Penn State scandal. For example, the term “horsing around” was frequently used to describe Sandusky’s behavior with young boys, and the boys themselves were in some cases termed “guests” instead of victims (Lucas & Fyke, 2013). These scholars argue that the use of euphemisms impaired ethical decision making in this case (Lucas & Fyke, 2013). Lucas and Fyke (2013) cite McGlone, who states, “Euphemism succeeds as a discourse strategy in the same manner camouflage succeeds in its military mission – by rendering its subjects as inconspicuous as possible in the surrounding context.” It is easier to forget events described in euphemistic terms, and using euphemisms creates more ambiguity and thus more opportunity for genuine or feigned misunderstanding (Lucas & Fyke, 2013). Ambiguity and misunderstanding in turn leave room for diffusion of personal responsibility for immoral actions (Lucas & Fyke, 2013). This issue, of course, extends beyond just one case study.

Using Consensual Language to Describe Nonconsensual Acts

In some cases, assault is described using the language of consensual sex. This may be traumatizing for rape victims and may propagate harmful misperceptions about assault, such as that a victim has a role in her own victimization or that rape somehow brings a level of pleasure

for victims. Judge Jeffrey Cheuvront banned Tory Bowen from using the word *rape* in her testimony against Pamir Safi in 2007. He ultimately allowed use of the term “sexual assault,” but for a period Tory Bowen was forced to use terms such as “sex” and “intercourse” to describe her rape, an experience that she compared to being assaulted a second time (Atassi, 2009).

Atassi points out that word bans like this are relatively unique to rape and sexual assault cases. The reasoning given in the Bowen case was that using the word “rape” would conflict with the ideal of presuming innocence until guilt is proven because the term implies the defendant’s guilt. However, Atassi points out that it would be unheard of for witnesses/victims to be banned from using words like “robbed,” or “embezzled,” even though the same logic should apply to other crimes as well. Atassi also points out that it is unlikely that using the word “rape” prejudicially influences juries toward conviction, considering how few defendants in rape cases are ultimately convicted. When victims have to use consensual words like “sex” or “intercourse” to refer to assault, however, this may contribute to the rape myth that victims somehow play a role in their own victimization.

Using consensual language to describe assault happens outside the courtroom as well, perhaps most notably in the media. Headlines use phrases such as “Man accused of having sex with underage girl” when there is no potential basis for consent in such a situation based on current legal definitions. Because of the widespread distribution of and access to media sources, the language used in news articles has the potential to reach and influence large numbers of people. These headlines also play into the myth that rape victims are complicit in their own victimization.

Grammatical Structure and Agency

In many cases when we speak about women who have been assaulted, we do just that – speak about women who have been assaulted using passive voice without addressing the presence of an aggressor or perpetrator. One German study found that when participants were asked to write a summary of a rape scene in a video, passive voice was more often used when describing the perpetrator raping the victim than when describing any other actions of the perpetrator or victim (Bohner, 2001). Use of the passive voice was correlated to rape myth acceptance and attribution of responsibility (Bohner, 2001). Because there have been mixed findings regarding the interaction of rape myth acceptance and passive voice, more research needs to be done on this topic (Bohner, 2001).

As Jackson Katz discusses in his TEDx Talk, “Violence Against Women – it’s a Men’s Issue,” we often grammatically remove the agent when we speak about assault in passive voice. His example is that we say “Mary was beaten by John,” which turns into, “Mary was beaten,” instead of “John beat Mary.” Katz uses this example to show how the grammatical structure of our language turns sexual violence into a women’s and victim’s issue and allows male perpetrators to go undiscussed. It is important that sexual violence not be viewed as a women’s issue exclusively for several reasons. First of all, conceptualizing sexual violence as a women’s issue ignores the fact that sexual violence is most often perpetrated by men, and thus ignores a crucial point of prevention and intervention. Second, men still have more economic and political power than women in our systems currently. As a result, it may help for more men in leadership positions to understand that eliminating sexual violence is a human rights issue that has implications for everyone in our society if this will incentivize male leaders to invest in the fight against sexual violence. This is not to say that male leaders have been absent in the fight against

sexual assault. President Obama and Vice President Biden, for example, have made concerted efforts to reduce violence against women in the U.S. through legislation and through educational campaigns such as the “1 is 2 Many Campaign,” which, as its name suggests, emphasizes that even one girl being submitted to sexual abuse or assault is unacceptable (White House, 2014). The campaign shares statistics about the prevalence of sexual assault to underscore that many, many girls and women are victims of sexual violence in our nation. A greater number of authoritative male voices speaking about the dangers and prevalence of sexual violence can only strengthen the fight against it.

Implying Skepticism and Blame through Language

One of the most oft-discussed language issues surrounding sexual assault is the way survivors are addressed, spoken to, and questioned by those they report to. Questions like, “What were you wearing?,” “Are you sure he assaulted you?,” “Were you drinking?,” and “If you didn’t want to have sex, why did you enter his room?” are all examples of questions that suggest the survivor’s credibility is limited or that a survivor is partially to blame for her own victimization . Insinuating the victims aren’t credible plays into the myth that most rape reports are contrived, which is not the case. In reality, false reporting rates for rape are low, with estimates ranging from 2% to 10% (Lonsway, 2009). Insinuating that victims may be to blame for their own victimization in anyway also plays into rape myths (e.g., that rape results from anything other than one individual’s decision to attack another) and thus perpetuates rape culture.

One relatively recent example of victim-blaming language was a “crime prevention tip sheet” written by the University of Wisconsin Police Department in October of 2014. These tips sparked controversy because of language like “A victim looks like a victim” and “If you present

yourself as easy prey, then expect to attract some wolves.” While the university said the post, originally titled “Shedding the Victim Persona: Staying Safe on Campus” was not addressing sexual assault specifically, many believed the post was sending the message that women have some measure of responsibility when they are assaulted. The tip sheet was revised after the UW PD received complaints from readers and the site clarified that victims are never to blame.

However, even after declaring victims are never to blame, other portions of the post still included victim-blaming language. For example, one sentence in a tip about staying in well-lit areas read, “The ability of a criminal to hide their intentions under the cover of darkness is too big of an opportunity for them to pass up.” This sentence takes the blame off the perpetrator, who couldn’t help himself when presented with the opportunity to attack or commit a crime. Because the responsibility is taken off the criminal, the implication is that the responsibility shifts to the potential victim – it is his or her job to not present a criminal with an irresistible opportunity. The revised version of the post concludes with the statement that anyone can become a victim and that “it can’t happen to me” is the wrong attitude. The right attitude, according to the University of Wisconsin Police Department, is that “I won’t let it happen to me!” Of course, individuals are not in control of whether or not they are victimized, so this statement continues to play into the same rape myths as the original post. This illustrates that sometimes language needs to go through multiple rounds of revision to check for damaging assumptions and that organizations need to be continuously held accountable for the language they use.

Summary

The aspects of our language outlined above (use of the word *rape*, euphemistic language, using consensual language to describe assault, implied skepticism and blame, and grammatical

structure) are all problematic because they either trivialize rape, are insensitive to survivors, or play into rape myths such as the idea that rapists cannot keep themselves from committing rape and the idea that victims are complicit in their own victimization. These aspects of our language need to be addressed, and individuals and organizations at all levels of society can contribute to making positive changes in this realm. Universities, women-focused and girl-serving organizations, researchers, law enforcement, the court system, media outlets, and individuals all have a role to play in challenging and changing language. The implications for each are discussed below.

Implications for Local Organizations and Individuals

Universities

Universities have the potential to monitor and change the language used around sexual assault in several ways. First, all universities have written policies on their websites regarding the process of coming forward about sexual assault. This language should be checked to ensure that it is encouraging of survivors and does not indicate even subtly that a victim might be blamed during the process of reporting an assault to the university. If “risk reduction” tips are shared on university websites, it should be made explicitly clear that victims are never at fault, and that ultimately rape comes down to an aggressor’s choice to assault another person. Universities may take the opportunity to educate students about rape culture through these webpages. For example, Marshall University’s Women’s Center explains rape culture, gives examples of how rape culture manifests itself, and gives ways that both men and women can combat rape culture. Marshall University here specifically mentions misogynistic language, sexually explicit jokes, and phrases like “boys will be boys!” as elements of rape culture and suggests that men and

women avoid language that degrades women and speak out if they hear another person trivializing rape.

Universities also have the power to influence the conversation about sexual assault through curricula in the classroom, most easily in psychology, social work/welfare, sociology, and gender/sexuality courses. Because these majors are predominately comprised of female students, universities should strive to find avenues for reaching male students with the same messages. Awareness about the power of language and issues such as sexual violence can potentially be incorporated into literature, rhetoric, ethics, and economics courses, among others. Curricula in all subject areas should be vetted to ensure that there are not damaging underlying assumptions and judgments made about women who survive assault, and to eliminate androcentrism more generally. Universities have substantial influence over the student body and community at large, and this influence should be utilized (through campaigns, events, etc) to open up broader discussion about the reality of sexual assault and rape culture in our community. This includes being transparent about sexual assault rates, rates of reporting, and potential explanations for both. The more information communities have, and the more accurate that information is, the more fruitful community dialogues will be.

When sexual assault cases arise, universities should be intentional about handling those events with language that conveys the severity of the crime, the lack of tolerance for such acts on

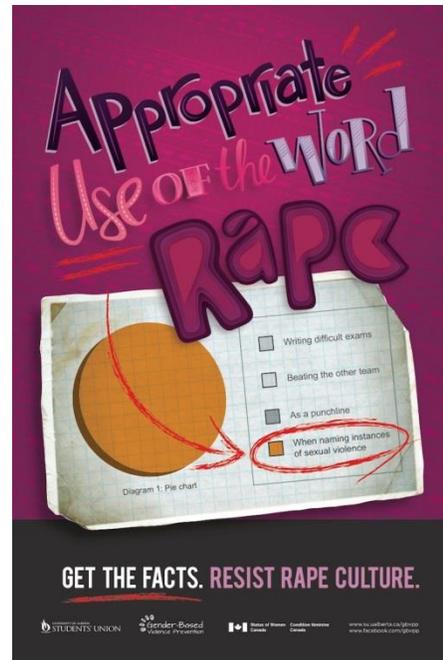


Figure 1 The University of Alberta in Canada posted three posters around their campus intended to combat rape culture. This poster focuses specifically on appropriate use of the word "rape."

the university campus, and sympathy for survivors. Universities should have clearly worded policies and information sheets that let survivors know how they can access services after reporting. In recognition of the fact that victims are more likely to report rape to a friend than to an administrator or law enforcement official, trainings on how to respond appropriately and sensitively should be offered to students as well as administrators. Universities should also consider funding or supporting research initiatives about the way that language serves to encourage or discourage rape culture and victim-blaming, and about the ways that language used when responding to survivors affects those individuals.

Women-Focused and Girl-Serving Organizations

The Policy Center and other organizations that are elevating the issues facing girls and young women and/or providing services to young women should take a role in raising awareness that common language surrounding these topics can hold damaging assumptions and beliefs, and should take a role in encouraging and modeling thoughtful consideration of the language used when addressing these issues. Part of this includes using reflective practice to recognize and revise language when needed based on feedback from survivors or community members generally. The Policy Center and like-minded organizations should also play a role in challenging instances of inappropriate language in the media, in the justice system, and in daily conversations. The Policy Center specifically should add resources to the website that will help other organizations and professionals learn more about the importance of language in terms of sexual assault. These resources can include links to trainings by other organizations or original trainings about the importance of language in discussing and responding to sexual assault. Women-focused and girl-serving organizations may also consider providing training to other organizations or media outlets that do not have the capacity or knowledge to provide employees

with trainings themselves. Like universities, women-focused and girl-serving organizations can use their websites to educate community members about rape culture and to provide survivors with clear guidance about how to access services using language that emphasizes that victims are never at fault. Depending on purpose and capacity, some women-focused organizations may also contribute to research through funding or evaluations. Girl- and women- serving organizations have a unique opportunity to let girls and women vet the messaging they are putting out, and to ask questions about how girls and women themselves perceive and respond to messaging that organizations believe is appropriate and sensitive.

Researchers

Researchers have the potential to contribute to needed research on these topics both independently and in collaboration with universities or research organizations like the Policy Center. Universities and advocacy organizations may elect to create, fund, or support research initiatives themselves. Future research questions should assess the way language impacts not only women but also children, men, and overall cultural attitudes. It may be beneficial to look at sexual assault language from a developmental perspective – when do children begin internalizing the negative assumptions embedded in language? At what age/stage can children recognize the fallacies present in sexual assault language? Does the language we hear as children impact our beliefs about sexual assault later in life? Are individuals who have been consistently exposed to rape culture less likely to use critical thinking skills when presented with information about sexual assault compared to information about more “neutral” topics? What is the impact of changing our language on attitudes toward sexual assault and toward sexual assault survivors? Can changing our language impact how comfortable survivors feel reporting assault and how

likely they are to do so? Can changing our language ultimately contribute to reducing levels of sexual violence?

Local Law Enforcement/Court System

Local law enforcement have control over the language that is used in a few related arenas (interviewing techniques, training academy, etc). Law enforcement should be intentional about the language used when it is necessary to ask a victim about the events of her assault. Law enforcement members should also be intentional about the language used in any instances of interviews for the media, and should strive to avoid wording that suggests any level of blame or responsibility on the victims themselves. Issues related to language can be incorporated into officer trainings regarding sexual assault. For instance, the Arkansas Coalition Against Sexual Assault has a training on its website titled “Language of Sexual Assault Crimes” that is to be utilized by law enforcement. This training emphasizes that appropriate language needs to be used when interviewing victims and obtaining reports and gives specific examples as to how this should be done. This training specifically addresses the issue of consensual language being used to describe sexual assault. Problematic examples of this kind of language mentioned in the training include phrases like “She then had sex with him,” when the statement should be along the line of “Then he assaulted her.” This training also brings up issues related to passive grammatical structure, and discusses that sentences like “She was assaulted” are problematic because they omit the agent of the assault.

Local Media Institutions

The media plays a role in the way our society talks and thinks about sexual assault through covering sexual assault cases. Much of our information about sexual assault (at least for

the general population) comes through news outlets. Traditional media and social media both have the potential to reach and influence a vast number of people in our country. Media outlets should provide journalists and reporters with trainings and guidelines on how to write and speak about sexual assault in appropriate ways. Media outlets should be especially careful about headlines and the use of passive voice. End Violence Against Women International (2013) put forth a set of “Suggested Guidelines on Language Use for Sexual Assault” that may be especially helpful for those writing about this topic. These guidelines give suggestions about how to refer to victims as well as perpetrators, discuss the importance of using active language, and give examples of how to avoid using consensual language to describe assault. Chicago Taskforce on Violence Against Girls & Young Women (2012) also put together “Reporting on Rape and Sexual Violence: A Media Toolkit for Local and National Journalists to Better Media Coverage,” and this extensive training tool may serve as a valuable resource as well. This media kit gives guidance on interviewing, writing, and also vetting written materials that discuss sexual assault. This toolkit emphasizes that journalists need to recognize the trauma that results from sexual assault and also seek to understand individual incidents of sexual violence in the context of long-term sociocultural issues. This toolkit addresses issues including, but certainly not limited to, use of passive voice, victim-blaming language, and use of consensual language to describe assault.

In addition to training reporters and journalists, media outlets may also choose to include analysis about the words being used by other individuals or organizations to describe a given sexual assault case. For example, when Treon Harris’s lawyer Huntley Johnson released a statement early in October 2014 about the case that referred to the victim as a “sexual aggressor” and appealed to the victim’s sexual history, media outlets could have taken the opportunity to analyze and deconstruct the arguments and language embedded in such a piece when presenting

it to their respective audiences. However, many factors play in to what journalists/reporters write and what media outlets are willing to run and publish. Sensational and divisive headlines and text may grab attention and thus bring in more profit or higher ratings, so it is important that those in the media understand the importance of the language they use and feel invested in making a positive difference through their use of language. In addition, there must be some level of demand from information consumers to see this kind of journalism in order to incentivize and hold media institutions accountable.

Individuals

Finally, individuals can contribute by using appropriate language themselves, thinking critically about the judgments and assumptions embedded in language, and challenging instances of inappropriate language use by other individuals, organizations, or institutions. There are many examples of individuals of all ages speaking out against instances of inappropriate uses of language in regards to sexual assault, and there are many strategies for doing so. For example, students on staff at Lowell High School's newspaper wrote an article calling on students to avoid making rape jokes after a video related to the Steubenville case was circulated. Individuals can write letters to the editors of local newspapers if language needs to be changed or challenged. The following is an example of a letter to an editor regarding language used to discuss sexual assault. This letter to the editor of the Tampa Bay Times was submitted by this author after one of the paper's articles used the term "underage prostitute" in the headline and body text:

"I read your article 'Ocala officer accused of sex with underage prostitute' released October 31, 2014. Identifying the 16-year old as a "child prostitute" is inappropriate, regardless of how the girl self-identified. How can you be a prostitute if you are not of the legal age to consent to sex? This police officer raped a young girl. Would there be any

question about statutory rape charges if money had not changed hands? There is an extreme power differential between a police officer and a young girl who is away from home, vulnerable, and probably in need of food and shelter. The fact that this power was abused is outrageous when we should be able to trust police officers in our state to care of and protect our youth. We should not water down our language or misrepresent the situation by using terms like ‘sexual activity’ and ‘child prostitute,’ but should use the terms that reflect the reality of the situation – rape, abuse of power, coercion, victimization, and exploitation.”

By submitting letters such as this one and pointing out problematic language, individuals can help to hold media outlets and other institutions accountable for the language they use. Every individual has a sphere of influence and everyone has a voice in changing the conversation about sexual assault.

Appendix: Summary Blog Post

My Fellowship Project: Changing the Conversation about Sexual Assault

Some of you know the statistics about sexual assault in our nation. Based on current estimates, approximately 1 in 5 women in the U.S. have been raped at least once, and many more will be subjected to some form of sexual violence during their lifetime. Over the course of my fellowship at the Policy Center I have become absolutely convinced of the importance of raising our voices against gendered violence in our nation. As we raise our voices, I believe it is imperative that we think critically about the language we use, and that we recognize the assumptions and value judgments embedded in that language. Below are a few of the issues I think we should consider:

1. **Use of the word rape.** Why do we often use the word rape so lightly? Rape is not a synonym for winning, dominating, successfully completing a task, etc., and I believe that using the word rape in this way is insensitive to survivors and may desensitize individuals to the severity and intensity of the crime it stand for.

“That team raped us” -> “That team defeated us”

2. **Euphemistic language.** Through my research I have come to believe that it is important to “call it what it is.” This means not using euphemisms to lessen the discomfort of talking about sexual violence. There is a reason that discussing sexual violence is uncomfortable – it is a gross violation of human rights. Let’s not use our language to make it seem more palatable.

“He forced himself on her” -> “He raped her”

3. **Consensual language.** Unfortunately, the language of consensual sex is sometimes used to describe rape and assault. Let’s use our language to make clear distinctions between sex and rape – the lines between the two are not blurred.

“The adult male had sex with the young girl” -> “The adult male raped the young girl”

4. **Grammatical agency.** Sometimes when we discuss assault we remove the grammatical agent altogether, which leaves aggressors out of the conversation. I believe we should make sure to include sexual aggressors in our language in the interest of holding men accountable and not letting sexual violence become just a “women’s issue.”

“She was sexually assaulted” -> “He sexually assaulted her”

5. **Victim blaming.** Recognize that false reporting rates for sexual assault are very similar to false reporting rates for other major crimes. Underreporting rates, however, are much more extreme in cases of sexual violence. When victims/survivors share their

experiences, let's use our language to support them instead of to indicate skepticism, disbelief, blame, or judgment.

“What were you wearing?” -> Just don't ask! The answer is irrelevant because no article of clothing excuses rape.

What is my call to action? Recognize the power of language. Think critically about the assumptions and judgments embedded in language. Choose your words carefully. Use your language to help create an environment that supports survivors and holds aggressors accountable. Examine the language used by other individuals, organizations, and media outlets. Speak up, write letters, speak out when you see inappropriate language used to discuss sexual assault. To learn more and see my take on the implications for stakeholders at all levels of our community, read my full paper [here](#).

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