Performing Gender: 
A Discourse Analysis of Theatre-Based Sexual Violence Prevention Programs

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Among the numerous approaches that are employed to prevent sexual violence, the performance of scenarios has become one of the ‘promising practices’ in U.S. postsecondary education. This article describes findings from a pilot study to analyze scripts used for theatre-based sexual violence prevention programs. Employing the method of discourse analysis, this study analyzed five sexual violence prevention scripts from three postsecondary institutions to identify the predominant discourses taken up to depict men and women in theatre-based sexual violence prevention programs. Analysis revealed dominant discourses of masculinity and femininity shaping images of men as heroes and abusers and women as vulnerable and victims. The article concludes with recommendations for student affairs practice.

Sexual violence, defined as any sexual act that is nonconsensual or forced against someone’s will, is a significant public health problem
that affects millions of people every year in the United States (Basile & Saltzman, 2002). The National Violence Against Women Survey estimates that 1 in 6 women and 1 in 33 men have been victims of a completed or attempted rape at some point in their lifetime (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2006). Among college students in the United States, between 20% and 25% of women reported experiencing completed or attempted rape (Fisher, Cullen, & Turner 2000).

The disturbing prevalence of sexual violence on college and university campuses continues to garner much attention, and concern has been expressed at the highest levels of government (Karjane, Fisher, & Cullen, 2005). Several laws have been enacted—most notable the Clery Act\(^1\)—requiring institutions of higher education to disclose information about campus crimes, ensure victims of sexual violence are afforded basic rights, and institute policies to prevent and respond to sexual violence, among other mandates. Prevention efforts range from safety-related educational programs and self-defense, to sexual violence awareness workshops and peer education. Among the numerous approaches that are employed to prevent sexual violence, the performance of scenarios, typically followed by facilitated discussion, has become one of the ‘promising practices’ in U.S. postsecondary education (Karjane, Fisher, & Cullen, 2005).

Performance is a creative mechanism for heightening awareness and providing education to the community about issues related to sexual violence. Recognizing this, student affairs personnel on campuses across the United States implement theatre-based sexual violence prevention programs in residence halls, during new student orientation, with special populations (e.g., athletes, fraternities), and at other campus events. Educators, typically students, perform scenarios and devise a program around these narratives; after the performance, audience members are often invited to interrogate the characters and the choices they made or failed to make. This article describes findings

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from a pilot study that analyzed scripts to identify the predominant discourses taken up to depict men and women in theatre-based sexual violence prevention programs.

**Significance**

Despite the proliferation of educational interventions and prevention strategies, the incidence of sexual violence has not been reduced. Many studies have examined the effectiveness of sexual violence prevention efforts in higher education (Breitenbecher, 2000; Davis & Liddell, 2002; Fonow, Richardson, & Wemmerus, 1992; Foshee, Bauman, Greene, Koch, Linder, & MacDougall, 2000; Foubert, 2000; Lonsway & Kothari, 2000); however, evaluations reveal mostly short-term reductions in rape-supportive attitudes, with insufficient evidence to conclude that such programs are effective in reducing the incidence of sexual assault (Wolfe & Jaffe, 2003). Furthermore, none have investigated the discursive construction of men and women in theatre-based sexual violence prevention programs. Identifying dominant discourses that contribute to shaping identities for men and women can provide another lens through which to understand sexual violence prevention efforts and how sexual violence is constituted in a given context. It may also help health educators, new student orientation directors, residence life staff, and other student affairs practitioners to be more effective in their use of theatre-based programs as a tool to prevent sexual violence.

**Purpose and Questions**

In order to enhance understanding of theatre-based sexual violence prevention programs, and how they contribute to shaping identities for men and women, this study identifies and analyzes discourses circulating in sexual violence prevention scripts. For institutions of higher education to address the problem of sexual violence, in reality as much as in perception, colleges and universities must consider how the problem of sexual violence is portrayed. According to Bacchi (1999), the way we look at something determines what we do about changing it; thus, how we address the problem of sexual violence is contingent upon how we perceive it. Discourses—constellations of words and images circulating in broader society (Allan, 2003)—
provide “frameworks or ways of viewing issues” (Bacchi, 1999, p. 40). Several scholars have examined the ways in which discourses operate to re-produce the problem of violence against women, a problem that is inclusive of sexual harassment, rape, domestic violence, stalking, and sexual exploitation (Alcoff & Gray, 1993; Bacchi, 1999; Cahill, 2000; Eyre, 2000; Ferraro, 1996; Heberle, 1996; Hengehold, 2000, 1994; Pollack, 1990; Woodhull, 1988). The goal of this study is to extend this body of inquiry to include an analysis of predominant discourses taken up by men and women in scripts used for theatre-based sexual violence prevention programs.

Dominant constructions of sexual violence frame the problem more often as something that a woman experiences, rather than something a man does (Cahill, 2000). Interventions and prevention efforts tend to individualize the problem rather than treat sexual violence as a “group or social injury” (Bacchi, 1999) or consider sexual violence “as a structural symptom of gender inequality” (Hengehold, 1994). Thus, an investigation of the discourses circulating in sexual violence prevention scripts enables a shift in the focus “away from individuals and structures to forms of knowledge and relations of power in a specific site” (Eyre, 2000, p. 294). This analytic approach illustrates how power operates discursively to re-produce particular perspectives regarding sexual violence, and interrogates the use of assumptive concepts in language that may limit a prevention strategy’s effectiveness and actually reinscribe the very problem the policy seeks to alleviate (Allan, 2003; Bacchi, 1999; Ball, 1990).

Employing the method of discourse analysis, the objective of this inquiry was to analyze predominant discourses taken up to depict men and women in scripts used for theatre-based sexual violence prevention programs. The following questions framed the study:

- What are the predominant images of women and men in sexual violence prevention scripts?
- What discourses are employed to shape these images?
- What identity positions are discursively re-produced for women and men on campus?
Review of Relevant Literature

The Problem of Sexual Violence

The rates of victimization and perpetration are startling. Women are more likely to be victims of sexual violence than men: 85.8% of the victims of rape and sexual assault are women and 14.2% are men (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2006). Women in college who use drugs, attend a university with high drinking rates, belong in a sorority, and drank heavily in high school are at greater risk for rape while intoxicated (Abbey, 2002; Mohler-Kuo, Dowdall, Koss, & Wechsler, 2004). Further, statistics on sexual violence are biased by underreporting, due to victims’ embarrassment, shame, fear, feelings of discomfort and mistrust about the official(s) to whom an assault is reported (Department of Justice, 2003; Fisher, Cullen, & Turner, 2000).

Most perpetrators of sexual violence are men. Findings from the National Violence Against Women Survey reveal that “nearly all of the female victims (99.6%) and most of the male victims (85.2%) were raped by a male” (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2006, p. 26). Further, sexual violence perpetrators are at increased risk of perpetrating again (Lisak & Miller, 2002). Given these findings, sexual violence prevention strategies on campus should focus primarily on the risks posed by male perpetrators (Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998).

The consequences of sexual violence are many:

- **Physical**: Women who experience both sexual and physical abuse are significantly more likely to have sexually transmitted diseases (Holmes, 1999; Wingood, DiClemente, & Raj, 2000).

- **Psychological**: Victims of sexual violence face both immediate and long-term psychological consequences (Ackard & Neumark-Sztainer, 2002; Krakow et al., 2002).

- **Health behaviors**: Some researchers view the following health behaviors as both consequences of sexual violence and factors that increase a person’s vulnerability to being victimized again in the future: engaging in high-risk sexual behavior and using or abusing harmful substances (Brener, McMahon, Warren, & Douglas, 1999; Champion, Foley, DuRant, Hensberry, Altman, & Wolfson, 2004).
Thus, sexual violence is a significant public health concern and has a devastating impact on individuals, campus communities, and our society as a whole. A response to the problem of sexual violence demands an approach that aims to moderate and mediate contributing factors that are preventable and increase protective factors that reduce vulnerability factors for victimization and risk factors for perpetration. Further, prevention strategies must move beyond focusing on individual risk factors for sexual violence to considering how community and social systems influence the risk of sexual violence.

Prevention Strategies

The goal for sexual violence prevention is simple: stop sexual violence from happening. Prevention strategies are generally considered in terms of primary, secondary, and tertiary (Wolfe & Jaffe, 2003). Primary prevention involves efforts to reduce the incidence of sexual violence among a population before it occurs. For instance, primary prevention includes efforts to foster social norms and environments in which sexual violence does not occur (e.g., Berkowitz, 2003). The goal of secondary prevention is to target services to select (at-risk) individuals, in an effort to decrease the incidence of sexual violence by reducing known or suspected risk factors (Wolfe & Jaffe, 2003). An example of secondary prevention is a mandatory program for first-year college students who have a history of victimization or problems with substance abuse, which are associated with dating violence and sexual assault (e.g., Lonsway & Kothari, 2000). Tertiary prevention involves attempts to minimize the course of a problem (sexual violence) once it is already clearly evident and causing harm, meaning the identification of sexual violence perpetrators and victims, control of the behavior and its effect, punishment or treatment for the perpetrators, and support for the victims (Wolfe & Jaffe, 2003). Examples of tertiary prevention are evident in the response and intervention by health care professionals, campus police, judicial affairs, and victim support services, among others.

Several promising prevention strategies exist: educational and policy-related interventions to change social norms, early identification of abuse by health and other professionals, programs and strategies to empower women, safety and supportive resources for victims of
abuse, and improved policies and laws and access to the criminal justice system (Hyman, Guruge, Stewart, & Ahmad, 2000). One study of the types of prevention efforts at U.S. postsecondary institutions found that deterrence-based prevention efforts were most common, followed by risk- or opportunity-reduction approaches, and zero tolerance programs, with “only a handful of campuses” employing victim empathy or male responsibility programs as a prevention strategy (Potter, Krider, & McMahon, 2000). Potter et al. (2000) conclude that the approaches to sexual violence prevention have changed little in 15 years, still focusing largely on deterrence-based programs. They argue for increased promotion of positive sexual behavior. Further, an increased utilization of a male responsibility model for sexual violence prevention efforts seems warranted given the high incidence of male perpetration. Finally, some scholars have observed the need for and benefits of tailoring prevention efforts according to population characteristics (Gross, Winslett, Roberts, & Gohm, 2006). For instance, programs on the role of alcohol in sexual aggression may be more relevant for White than African American college students (Gross et al., 2006). While many studies have examined prevention efforts, gaps remain in our understanding of sexual violence prevention efforts and continued research is needed (Wolfe & Jaffe, 2003).

Conceptual Framework

Gender Theory

Analyzing the phenomenon of sexual violence through the lens of gender theory provides some helpful insights on how the problem of sexual violence is gendered, and what taken-for-granted assumptions about the problem are seen as normal or natural ways for women and men to act. Since gender norms are so often taken for granted, they can be easily overlooked. Further, most of us are not likely to be fully conscious of our own cultural and social assumptions about gender, since through our socialization gender norms have been carefully taught and reinforced by family, peers, schools, and community (Allan, 2004).

This article draws upon Allan’s (2004) definition of gender theory to “denote a body of theories that examines how cultural expectations
about femininity and masculinity shape understandings of women and men as gendered selves” (p. 278). Gender theory contends that dominant versions of masculinity and femininity are learned and performed, rather than rooted in one’s biology (Allan, 2004; Lorber, 2004). Further, it is important to note that there are not singular conceptions of masculinity and femininity; however, dominant constructions suggest a universality of maleness and femaleness. Scholars have illuminated the multiplicity of our identities and experiences, shaped by not only one’s gender, but also by race, sexuality, class, age, and other identity statuses (Crenshaw, 1991; Kimmel, 2000; Reynolds & Pope, 1991; West & Fenstermaker, 1995).

Predominant versions of masculinity and femininity generally operate as two poles of a gender binary (Bem, 1993). Boys and girls, and men and women, learn gender rules that position them as polar opposites: “acting like a man” requires males to stifle feelings, be strong, competitive, and independent. Conversely, “good girls” learn to be relational, nurturing, dependent, submissive, and passive. Alternatives to these dominant constructions are typically marginalized or rendered invisible. Acting in gender-appropriate ways is further reinforced through the consequences of stepping outside the box (Kivel, 1999). Individuals whose behavior is interpreted as counter to their gender will be labeled in ways that are perceived negatively or viewed as deviant (e.g., a boy playing with dolls or a girl who is overly aggressive will be called “sissy” or “bitch” respectively) (Allan, 2004; Kimmel, 2000).

Discourse Theory
This study of images of men and women in sexual violence prevention scripts is rooted in an understanding that “discourses construct certain possibilities for thought. They order and combine words in particular ways and exclude or displace other combinations” (Ball in Bacchi, 1999, p. 41). As Shore & Wright (1997) observe, “discourses are ways of thinking, which may overlap and reinforce each other and close off other possible ways of thinking” (p. 18). For example, diversity in higher education is often described through two predominant, yet divergent discourses. One discourse represents diversity in a deficit frame and contributes to generating interventions that include reme-
dial courses and support services, among others; while another discourse frames diversity as in/equity, shifting attention to institutional practices and the production of unequal educational outcomes (Bensimon, 2005). As evidenced by this example, discourses are never neutral; as Shore & Wright (1997) observe, this “configuration of ideas . . . provides the threads from which ideologies are woven” (p. 18).

Thus, discourse is “the key site for the social construction of meaning” (Cameron, 1998, p. 963). However, some discourses are taken up more readily than others; “dominant discourses work by setting up the terms of reference and by disallowing or marginalizing alternatives” (Shore & Wright, 1997, p. 18). Dominant discourses are reaffirmed through their institutionalization, and they can be identified most easily by the way in which they have been taken-for-granted (Allan, 2003; Bacchi, 1999; Mills, 1997).

Finally, through discourse, we take up or inhabit particular social identities. Our identity position—or subjectivity—refers to “our ways of being an individual,” positions we construct for ourselves through discourse (Weedon, 1997, p. 21). This article uses the term “identity position” to describe the particular social identities—or subject positions—we occupy and the social roles we perform. For instance, mother, athlete, professional, and ally are all identity positions that one might occupy. These identity positions are shaped through discourse, and we are invited to assume them (Allan, 2003). This study analyzed the identity positions that were constructed through the dominant discourses circulating in sexual violence prevention scripts.

Methods

Sample
The sample for this pilot study consisted of five sexual violence prevention scripts from three U.S. postsecondary institutions. These scripts were collected via a solicitation posted on a sexual violence in higher education electronic mailing list. Specifically, the primary data included:
Two scripts (Fast Times, 2004; The Dance, 1997) used for new student orientation at Brunswick University, a New England land-grant university with approximately 10,000 students.

Two scripts (Date Rape Skit, 2002; Love, Sex & Consequences, 2003) used for new student orientation at Madison College, a Midwestern liberal arts college with approximately 2,400 students.

One script (Campus Issues, 2003) used for new student orientation at Prairie University, a Southwestern research university with approximately 40,000 undergraduates.

Analytic Process

This study employed the method of discourse analysis. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2000), discourse analysis is one of three major approaches to textual analysis that requires an examination of language, text, and meaning that emerge from the text. Typically, research on sexual violence prevention efforts are evaluative of program effectiveness, impact, and attitudinal change; and they do not provide a focus on the assumptions embedded in the naming of the problem of sexual violence and corresponding solutions to that problem. Further, they rarely situate gender central to the analysis. This investigation of predominant images of men and women in sexual violence prevention scripts uses discourse analysis to examine text; its relationship to the social context in which it is constructed; and why, out of all the possible things that could be articulated, only certain statements and ideas are made visible or heard (Allan, 2003; Ball, 1990).

The process of data analysis was informed by established methods of qualitative inquiry (Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Miles & Huberman, 1994). The first phase of the analysis involved deductive coding in reply to the research questions. Through the use of NVivo, computer

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2 The names of the institutions—Brunswick University, Madison College, and Prairie University—are pseudonyms.

3 The other two approaches, according to Denzin and Lincoln, are content analysis and semiotics.
software designed by QSR for qualitative data analysis, line-by-line analysis of each script was conducted to identify and code images of women and men portrayed in sexual violence prevention scripts. With this technique, “the patterns, themes, and categories of analysis . . . emerge out of the data rather than being imposed on them prior to data collection and analysis” (Patton, 1980, p. 306). Once all documents were coded, NVivo was used to generate a “report” for the images across all sexual violence prevention scripts. This report was then analyzed using both deductive and inductive processes, which served as the second phase of coding; in this phase, the codes assigned were both descriptive and interpretive (Miles & Huberman, 1994). According to Allan (2003), coding can provide a “mechanism for fragmenting data in ways that [allow] for different kinds of exploration” (p. 51). These codes were then clustered according to common themes to generate image categories and identify identity positions that emerged from these images. The creation of a visual display was a useful “tactic” at this point for generating meaning, seeing plausibility, and noting relationships between concepts (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Finally, an examination of the coded data for conceptual patterns and linkages illuminated how coded text reflected and shaped discourses circulating within the scripts and how these discourses produced particular identity positions. In sum, the analytic process was multilayered, emphasizing the ways in which discourses construct particular images for women and men related to sexual violence.

**Findings and Interpretations**

Analysis of the five scripts used for theatre-based sexual violence prevention programs revealed dominant discourses of masculinity and femininity as prominent in conveying images of men and women. Discourses of morality and violence, supported by a dominant discourse of masculinity, produces the male-as-hero and male-as-abuser respectively. Discourses of dependence and distress, supported by a dominant discourse of femininity, constructs the woman as vulnerable and the victim respectively. Drawing upon the data, a description of each discourse follows.

**Discourse of Masculinity**

Emerging from a broader discourse of autonomy, the discourse of mas-
masculinity contributes to shaping an image of men as strong, determined, independent, and aggressive. Supported by the discourse of autonomy, masculinity is characterized by individualism, free will, agency, self-control, and self-reliance (Christman, 2003; Goodwin, 2004). The performance of masculinity includes the ability to assert power and control, establish hierarchies, battle for position and possession, and assume the role of dominance over women and other men perceived as feminine (Franklin, 2004; Gear, 2001). The following data excerpt highlights these characteristics. In one scenario, Todd is telling his male friend, Steve, “about having sex” with Beth, noting that she “went rigid and seemed in pain.” Steve “asks Todd if he asked Beth to have sex.” When Todd says he didn’t “Steve gets agitated.” Todd, “upset,” states “I’m getting out of here” and walks off stage (Love, Sex & Consequences, 2003). The character Steve, like similar characters in the other scripts, illuminates free will, agency, power, dominance—imagery made visible by a discourse of masculinity. This performance illustrates how the autonomous male is independent, self-reliant, and can “protect himself from intrusion” (Code, 1991, p. 78)—not only intrusive questions from a friend, but also from an accusation of rape; when Todd asserts “I’m getting out of here” he is literally and symbolically getting away from (with) rape.

The characters Todd and Steve exemplify two strands of the discourse of masculinity: morally principled masculinity and violent masculinity that respectively construct identities for men as heroes and abusers.

*The Hero*
The discourse of morality, supported by a dominant discourse of masculinity, contributes to shaping images of men as “heroic” and “sweet” (Love, Sex & Consequences, 2003), “a nice guy” and “charming” (The Dance, 1997), “really mature,” “just nice to be around,” and “really cool and popular” (Date Rape Skit, 2002). Morally-principled masculinity is characterized by well-mannered, refined, intelligent, considerate, proper behavior; and is evident in treating others in a respectful manner, especially women. For instance, in Love, Sex & Consequences (2003), “Bill has left a bouquet of flowers on her car . . . for the third time that week. Anne’s roommate, Rose, thinks Bill is being sweet. . . . [and] insists that it is just Bill’s way of showing he loves her.” In another script, Anna reflects on her boyfriend: “Sometimes Brad can be so sweet. He surprises me with little presents,
and he’s always telling me that no one could ever love me the way he does” (Campus Issues, 2003). The discourses of morality and masculinity coalesce to produce the male-as-hero who is morally principled, exercises virtue, and possesses wisdom of experience.

When a female needs support or is feeling vulnerable, the male-as-hero is “a friend to be trusted” (Campus Issues, 2003). For instance, Mike, at a party with Sara, observes that “She was kind of leaning on me. . . . I put my hand on her shoulder to steady her.” Sara, in the scene entitled “he said, she said,” reflects that Mike “offered to walk me back to my dorm room . . . at times, he held up me so I wouldn’t fall down” (Date Rape Skit, 2002). The following scene from The Dance (1997) further illuminates these characteristics of maturity, respect, consideration, and good manners.

**Scene:** A man and woman are returning from a date. The man has just escorted the woman back to her room.

**Woman:** I had a really great time tonight. . . . Oh, and thanks for finding my earring in the movie theater. They were a gift from my dad.

**Man:** No problem, as long as you’re okay having that big piece of popcorn stuck to your ear (touches her ear quickly, they both laugh).

*later, in her room*

**Man:** (puts in a CD, something slow and close, then feigning shyness) Um, excuse me, miss, would you, uh, honor me with the pleasure of this dance?  
*He kisses her while they’re dancing. She pulls away and says they should stop.  
Man:** Yeah, sure, no problem. I thought that maybe, you know, but I guess not, and hey, that’s cool. I’m a big boy. It’s no big deal.

The chivalrous, courteous, considerate male-as-hero will also lessen his own desires and ambitions in the service of doing the right thing. However, as Pasco-Pranger (2004) observes, lessening of desires and ambitions must be within reason, since a man does not want to appear ‘soft’ or ‘effeminate’ or ‘passive.’ This was most evident in scenarios that demanded restraint. Initial concern by a male character for a female friend who is distressed and withdrawn—“Anna, you’re like a sister to me, you can talk to me about anything . . . you know that” (Love, Sex & Consequences, 2003)—later becomes agitation when the
male learns that the female friend was raped. However, the narrator counsels against “heroic fantasies of beating up the perpetrator.” In a later scene in this script (Love, Sex & Consequences, 2003), Mike confronts Brad: “you raped her, you bastard!”

Mike goes toward Brad pulling back his arm as if he is going to punch him.

Brad: No. . . . (turning his head as if anticipating a punch to his face)
Mike: (puts his fist down in disgust, shakes his head) That’s the difference, man, when you said NO, I stopped.

Thus, restraint is a cornerstone of morally-principled masculinity.

The image of male-as-hero has gained much currency in the last decade as men’s work to end sexual violence continues to gain prominence. Campaigns such as Men Can Stop Rape’s Men of Strength Campaign (MCSR, 2003) redefine what it means to be a man. A social norms approach to violence prevention is also used on many college and university campuses to engage men as allies in preventing sexual violence (Berkowitz, 2003). These strategies seek to introduce and illuminate alternative images for men, in an effort to contest and resist dominant constructions of masculinity. As one actor professes: “I’m not that kind of guy . . . I would never rape anyone” (Date Rape Skit, 2002). So, who is “that kind of guy” against which the man-as-hero is juxtaposed?

The Abuser
A closer look at some of the traits that have come to characterize the dominant version of Western masculinity reveals qualities like: aggressive, tough, strong, in control, and able to withstand pain (Allan, 2004; Kimmel, 2000; Kivel, 1999). These taken-for-granted assumptions implicit in the performance of idealized masculinity have led some scholars to analyze connections between the social construction of masculinity and violence (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 1998; Franklin, 2004; Kimmel, 2000; Totten, 2003). Heberle (1996) argues that “men’s bodies become weapons and tools of violence and women’s bodies become objects of violence” (p. 71, original emphasis). Further, as Gear (2001) observes, by raping another, the abuser seeks to validate his male dominance and superiority. The following excerpt from the data highlights this.
[Men] are taught how to “turn it on”, and discouraged from turning it off. An example of this has to do with a football player at another school. It was widely known that he was beating up his girlfriend by friends and athletic staff and no one did anything. One night there was a party and the police ended up getting called. This football player attacked the officer, but his teammates held him back (they knew it was a felony to attack the officer). The athletic department’s response was: “we teach them to ‘turn it on’ on the field, but it’s hard for these guys to ‘turn it off’ off of the field.” (Love, Sex & Consequences, 2003)

Violence is normalized and reified in dominant constructions of masculinity, and typically such behaviors are rationalized by expressions like “boys will be boys” (Love, Sex & Consequences, 2003). Further, the assertion that rape is an act of sex, rather than violence, power, and control, naturalizes sexual violence as a biological act; one act along a sexual continuum (Paglia, 1995; Thornhill & Palmer, 2000). For example, “Many times in the wake of a sexual assault some will say: ‘boys will be boys’ in an effort to dismiss the harm they have caused. The clear message is that we [men] can be sexual no matter what” (Love, Sex & Consequences, 2003). The discourses of violence and masculinity coalesce to produce the identity of men-as-abusers. This identity position is made visible through data that characterize men as “angry” and “forceful” (Love, Sex & Consequences, 2003), “furious,” “really jealous,” “vicious,” and “getting out of control with his anger” (Campus Issues, 2003). The discourse of violent masculinity constructs the man-as-abuser, as depicted in this data excerpt.

As she walks to her car in the parking lot, Bill appears, demanding to know why she refuses to talk to him. . . . Bill grows angry as he insists that he can’t get rid of his feelings for her and that they belong together. As Anne tries to get past him, Bill grabs her forcefully . . . (Love, Sex & Consequences, 2003, emphasis added).

Another data quote further highlights these characteristics: “Man kisses woman again. Woman seems uncomfortable . . . [M]an leans woman back and climbs on top of her. Woman begins protesting slightly, but man continues, holding her wrists . . . as woman urges for him to stop” (The Dance, 1997). Finally, male dominance, aggression, and violence are evident in another excerpt from the data.
“NO! You come on!” (presses his body toward her, forcibly) . . . Struggle, Brad pins Anna against wall and lifts her skirt. . . . Brad covers her mouth with his hand. Cut lights. Scream is loud in the darkness. Lights come up after a few moments. Brad walks stage right into the dark; Anna falls to her knees and crawls stage left. (Campus Issues, 2003)

One could dismiss these scenes as an expected performance of the male-as-abuser for scenarios depicting sexual violence. However, the male-as-abuser was dichotomously situated in male characters who were also the male-as-hero. The same character would perform Jekyll-and-Hyde roles: at one moment supportive, wise, virtuous, and principled (male-as-hero); and at the next moment, hostile, threatening, forceful, and aggressive (male-as-abuser). The scripts also situated the hero and the abuser in two different characters, like Steve and Todd, respectively (described previously). This performance served to introduce and model alternative roles for men and give permission and encouragement for men to resist and contest dominant constructions of masculinity. Possibilities to interrupt and resist dominant constructions of femininity were not visible in the discursive construction of women, which will be described next.

Discourse of Femininity

The discourse of femininity contributes to shaping images of women as “both charmed and a little confused” (The Dance, 1997), “scared” and “anxious” (Date Rape Skit, 2002), “bewildered” and “confused” (Fast Times, 2004). These characterizations are made possible through discourses of distress and dependency, supported by a dominant discourse of femininity that reinforces dominant cultural norms about how women “should” behave (Allan, 2003). These findings are consistent with and build upon Allan’s (2003) analysis of discourses embedded in university women’s commission reports, which identified women as vulnerable and victims—images made visible by discourses of distress and dependence, supported by a dominant discourse of femininity. I present my findings here using Allan’s categorization, which offers a useful framework and serves to illustrate the limited roles available for women in relation to sexual violence.
A dominant discourse of femininity “reinforces male dominance and heterosexism by shaping femininity in ways that promote women’s appeal to and dependence on men” (Allan, 2003, p. 52). Femininity, then, is about vulnerability and dependence, compassion and belonging, cooperation and communication. It is ultimately about being an object of desire; to be looked at and on display; and to have mastered the skills of psychological, domestic, and sexual service that men expect (Mills, 1992). As described in one script, women “learn that we are not supposed to speak up, we deny our feelings to help others, we must act lady-like, and we are supposed to be passive” (Love, Sex & Consequences, 2003).

The Vulnerable Woman

A discourse of dependence, supported by a dominant discourse of femininity, situates women as vulnerable and reliant on others, typically male friends, but also university personnel, to mediate their experience, support them, and keep them safe (Allan, 2003). For instance, in Fast Times (2004), Eric, Jen’s male roommate, “comforts her as she hugs her knees to the bed.” A data excerpt from another script delineates “how to help a friend who has been assaulted:”

1. Believe them, they are telling you the truth.
2. Tell them you are sorry that it happened and that it was not their fault.
3. Really listen; don’t jump to solutions.
4. Ask what kind of help they would like.
5. Suggest counseling in addition to talking with you. Offer to go with them.
6. Offer to make an appointment with them.
7. Don’t say “You’ve got to forget about this” or “When are you going to pull yourself together?”
8. Be aware of school and local support services . . . (Love, Sex & Consequences, 2003)

A data excerpt from another script delineates options for the person who has been assaulted:

1. Talk to a friend.
2. Talk to a [campus] counselor . . . or a community counselor, such as at the Rape Crisis Center.
3. Report the assault to the police.
4. Meet with the dean of students to:
   a. Discuss your options (e.g., review his living situation or class situation).
   b. File a grievance to pursue sanctions (*Date Rape Skit*, 2002).

As illustrated by these excerpts from the data, the vulnerable woman is dependent upon others; she is characterized as lacking agency, and even at times without voice. The following quote from the data further highlights this discursive construction.

Beth tells her female friend (Factoid Girl) that she feels dirty and disgusting; she had sex with Todd; she had been a virgin; Todd did not ask for Beth’s consent. The scene closes with both women wondering what to do next; Beth says “I don’t know.” (*Love, Sex & Consequences*, 2003, emphasis added).

The vulnerable woman is indecisive, unable to communicate clearly, and at risk. She is in need of protection and rescue; she is reduced to a state of passivity; her experience is contingent upon expert interpretation, requires therapeutic intervention, and must be mediated by others, ideally experts to give authority and legitimacy to her experience (see Kruks, 2001; Westlund, 1999). Telling one’s story—what Alcoff and Gray (1993) term “breaking the silence”—becomes “the necessary route to recovery . . . [and] a coercive imperative on survivors to confess, to recount our assaults, to give details, and even to do so publicly” (p. 281).

Prevention and intervention efforts stress reporting sexual violence and getting help; yet, few incidents of sexual victimization are reported to law enforcement officials. According to Fisher, Cullen, and Turner (2000), fewer than 5% of completed and attempted rapes were reported to law enforcement. According to the FBI, 16% of sexual violence victims report the crime to law enforcement (*Garcia & Henderson*, 1999). However, in two-thirds of sexual violence inci-

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4 See also Bacchi’s (1999) discussion of battered woman syndrome and learned helplessness (pp. 169–172).
dents the victims share their experience with someone (Fisher, Cullen, & Turner, 2000). Thus, it is important for sexual violence awareness programs to identify and perform other stories. As Alcoff and Gray (1993) suggest, following their critique of “the confessional structure,” women “need to transform arrangements of speaking to create spaces where survivors are authorized to be both witnesses and experts, both reporters of experience and theorists of experience” (p. 282).

The Victim
A discourse of distress, supported by a dominant discourse of femininity, situates women as violable, weak, fearful, and a “potential object of male anger, aggression, and violence” (Allan, 2003, p. 53). The following data excerpt serves to illuminate these characterizations. In Fast Times (2004), a woman is at a party talking with a male she knows from class. He offers her alcohol; she refuses initially, only to be easily persuaded by the man to drink many beers, to the point of intoxication. She goes to lie down, in a location to which the man has directed her. He follows her and begins making sexual advances. She is initially “bewildered;” she responds to his kisses, but then becomes “confused.” He “becomes bolder” and she “attempts to push him away, though visibly still intoxicated.” The lights fade as she says “no . . . please . . . no” (Fast Times, 2004).

In a data excerpt from another script (The Dance, 1997), a man and a woman return from a date, and the woman invites this “nice guy” into her dorm room, wherein the man asks the woman to dance. She is “both charmed and a little confused.” While dancing, the man kisses the woman. She is initially responsive to his advances, but then pulls away and turns off the music. She says she likes him, but she is surprised and uncomfortable by his advances. The man begins kissing her again; they “continue to make out and the man leans woman back and climbs on top of her. Woman begins protesting slightly, but man continues” (The Dance, 1997). Lights fade as the woman’s urges for him to stop become more audible (The Dance, 1997).

This article is not suggesting that sexual violence does not occur as portrayed in these scripts or that women’s safety is not a significant issue. Women on college and university campuses experience too many situations of harassment and sexual violence that impact individuals’ lives in devastating ways. The problem pointed to in this
analysis is the concern for women’s vulnerability, distress, and the inability of women to remain safe, rather than with the violence itself (Allan, 2003). Framed in this way, women must prepare themselves to defend against potential violence to their bodies, which are inscribed as “always already rapable” (Heberle, 1996). The following quote from the data highlights this characterization.

It is not our intention to tell you not to party. We just hope that after viewing this session that you will party safely and drink responsibly. If you go out with a group, watch out for the people around you and take steps to protect yourself. . . . we don’t want you to do something that could haunt you for the rest of your life. (Love, Sex & Consequences, 2003)

Another data excerpt offers: “Practicing preventative measures can help you reduce your chances of being a victim” (Date Rape Skit, 2002). This script later adds that “if you are raped it is not your fault. The perpetrator is responsible.” However, the male-as-abuser appears absolved of responsibility when the narrator concludes that “cultural rules set us up to assault and be assaulted,” echoing the dominant cultural reprieve ‘boys will be boys’ and reproducing dominant femininity discourses of distress and dependence.

**Discussion**

This investigation of discourses circulating in scripts used for theatre-based sexual violence prevention programs identified dominant discourses of masculinity and femininity as prominent in conveying images of men and women negotiating intimate encounters in higher education. These discourses contribute to shaping perceptions of men and women and their experiences with sexual violence, and constructing particular identity positions for men and women to assume. Discourses of morality and violence, supported by a dominant discourse of masculinity, produce the male-as-hero and male-as-abuser respectively. Discourses of dependence and distress, supported by a dominant discourse of femininity, construct the woman as vulnerable and the victim respectively.
The identity positions of male-as-hero and male-as-abuser were portrayed in discrete characters; but they were also situated in the same character, performing the disturbing Jekyll-and-Hyde role, alternating between phases of “charming” and “vicious” behavior. This representation is an accurate reflection of the scholarship examining perpetrator behaviors; yet, the scenarios fail to characterize behaviors as intentional, premeditated, coercive, and manipulative—the “undetected rapists” (Lisak, 2002; Lisak & Miller, 2002). Instead, the scripts depict a pleasant evening gone bad, typically because of too much alcohol. A reframing of the problems of excessive alcohol, miscommunication, and women’s safety as a problem of violent masculinity could produce a discursive shift that would likely yield very different scenarios (Allan, 2003).

Notable in the scripts is the development of the male-as-hero as a discrete character. As discussed above, and consistent with Fabiano et al. (2003), this representation serves to illuminate for men their role as allies in preventing sexual violence and the possibilities for resisting and interrupting dominant discourses of masculinity. While alternative discourses to draw upon are circulating for men, alternatives for women are obscured, and the consequences of this concealment are many. A reliance on discourses of distress and dependence situates women as (potential) victims and reifies women as vulnerable, passive, and dependent. A shortcoming of this discursive construction is that it “overshadows the articulation of additional strategies that could focus on violent behavior as the problem” (Allan, 2003, p. 55).

One script does offer an alternative with this notation: “you can choose which ending you prefer.” The data excerpt illustrating this alternative follows.

**Woman**: *(frustrated and getting angry)* Look, I told you that I wasn’t ready for that. If you cannot respect my decision, then maybe you aren’t as cool as I thought you were and maybe you should leave.

**Man**: Hey wait, I’m sorry. I can be such a jerk sometimes. Look, I didn’t mean to disrespect you. It’s just I think you’re cool and I am very attracted to you.
Woman: [...] I’d like to get to know you better before we hook up.

Man: Okay, I can handle that. It might be tough for me to keep my hands to myself, but if that’s how it has to be, then I will do my best. (*The Dance*, 1997)

Yet, even in the alternative ending, the man will “do my best” to keep his libido in check and his aggressive sexuality (performed only a few lines previous in this scenario) remains central to his masculine identity. Further, the woman, still attracted to him, quickly forgives (implicitly accepts) his aggressive sexuality, and suggests it is probable they will “hook up” eventually. The woman’s identity remains situated as an object of desire and the woman is continually mastering her skills of relational—sexual—service that men expect. The vulnerable woman, “frustrated and getting angry,” lures the man-as-hero, enacting a happy ending; yet, the audience is left with an unnerving awareness of the (likely) reemergence of the abuser and victim. These findings extend observations by Madriz (1997) that fear of victimization has forced women to “police” themselves, keeping women in subservient and vulnerable positions, and constraining their social life.

So, what alternative discourses are available and could be made visible? One possible interruption of the dominant discourse of femininity that constructs women as “submissive, fragile, and in need of protection” is to deploy a discourse of empowerment that constructs women as active survivors (Allan, 2003, p. 54). Self-defense programs are a prominent educational tool; yet, scripts fail to incorporate scenarios of women employing self-defense tactics or engaging other forms of resistance to sexual violence. Further, women can exercise their agency by performing assertive, confident, decisive roles. For instance, in the scenario (described above) when Beth discloses her experience of victimization to her female friend, rather than closing the scene with Beth saying “I don’t know,” she could display a range of emotions, inclusive of anger as much as sadness, strength as often as weakness. The use of a broad range of performances should not “engage us in an exercise of comparison and contrast about which woman did the right thing or was the quickest thinker” (Heberle, 1996, p. 72). Rather, a range of stories illuminates that women respond to incidents of sexual violence in a multiplicity of ways; and
serves to interrupt the dominant discourse of femininity that constitutes women as vulnerable, dependent, distressed, and victims.

**Implications**

Various student affairs personnel develop and implement theatre-based violence prevention programs, including health educators, new student orientation staff, residence life staff, and Greek affairs staff, among others. In this section, some suggestions are offered for how practitioners might use the findings of this research to improve their work.

Theatre-based violence prevention programs are more than just a performance; rather, a skit is typically preceded by an overview about sexual violence and followed with a debriefing of the performance and dissemination of information about campus and community resources. In what follows, some recommendations are delineated regarding the design and implementation of theatre-based violence prevention programs.

1. As described in the findings above, the performance of sexual violence education and prevention scenarios enacts certain roles for men and women. Student affairs practitioners have an opportunity to use these roles as a point of discussion regarding the social construction of gender, how dominant constructions of masculinity and femininity conceal alternative identity positions and yield consequences for performing alternative roles. Adams, Bell, and Griffin (1997) offer a useful exercise—Act Like A Man/Act Like A Woman—adapted from Paul Kivel’s “act like a man” box (1992), about gender messages and the costs and benefits of obeying these expectations.

2. The performance of seemingly discrete roles in the scripts analyzed suggested unified categories of “men” and “women”—straight, middle class, and presumably White. Program designers can provide an opportunity for the audience to interrogate these unified categories and investigate some possible unintended consequences of this conceptualization. Recognizing the ways in which race, sexual identity, class, and other social group memberships intersect and interact in defining one’s identity and experi-
ences of sexual violence is important (see Collins, 1998; Crenshaw, 1991; Hollander, 2001).

3. Student affairs personnel who develop theatre-based violence prevention programs are encouraged to transform the “monologue” of traditional performance into a “dialogue” between audience and stage (Paterson, 1995). Many theatre-based programs invite discussion with the actors (still in character) at the conclusion of scenario, but rarely is such dialogue facilitated during the performance. *Theater of the oppressed* (Boal, 1985) can serve as inspiration for alternative program design. This interactive theatre brings the audience into active relationship with the performed event; it serves as a virtual training ground for action not only in these performance forms, but also for life (Paterson, 1995). The University of Texas at Austin’s Voices Against Violence Peer Theatre Group serves as an exemplar for the implementation of this approach (see Taylor, 2004).

4. At the conclusion of a prevention program, organizers can facilitate discussion about strategies for change, both individual strategies (e.g., confront sexist comments) and institutional strategies (e.g., change policy) (see Johnson, 2006, pp. 136–153).\(^5\) This enables individuals to see how they are active participants socially (rather than a passive audience) and have a role and responsibility to work toward change.

5. Student affairs practitioners are encouraged to cultivate the (continued) involvement of pro-feminist men’s groups working against sexual violence, to support men who take responsibility for male behavior and redefine dominant constructions of masculinity that shape men’s role as oppressors of women (both actively and passively) (Kimmel & Messner, 2004).

6. Finally, in addition to the inclusion of scenarios about self-defense in theatre-based sexual violence prevention programs, practition-

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\(^5\) This recommendation is adapted from an activity in Adams, Bell, and Griffin (1997, p. 126).
ers could develop a “women of strength” campaign (Iverson & Nason, 2004), to promote images of women performing assertive, confident, decisive roles, and even resisting sexual violence. Practitioners who develop such a campaign could draw inspiration from Men Can Stop Rape’s “Strength Campaign” (see MCSR, 2003), which is grounded in a social ecological model, incorporating different levels of the social ecology—individual, relational, communal, and societal/policy (see Kruttschnitt, McLaughlin, & Petrie, 2004).

In sum, the findings of this study illustrate how dominant discourses of masculinity and femininity contribute to shaping perceptions of men and women and their experiences with sexual violence. As dominant discourses, they sometimes appear as the only discourse available, obscuring, marginalizing, or even disallowing alternative perspectives. The purpose of this investigation was to enhance understanding of the discourses circulating in scripts used for theatre-based sexual violence prevention programs and how these discourses contribute to shaping particular identity positions for men and women to assume. Further, this inquiry adds to the scholarship about how the problem of sexual violence is gendered (Martin & Hummer, 1989). The author hopes this article will inspire further research about the discursive construction of men and women in sexual violence prevention scripts.

**References**


