Violences faites aux femmes
Arcand, Suzanne, Damant, Dominique

Published by Presses de l'Université du Québec

Arcand, Suzanne and Dominique Damant.
Violences faites aux femmes.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/20003

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=704384
WALKING THE TIGHTROPE
Providing Sexual Assault Resistance Education for University Women without Victim Blame

Charlene Y. Senn
University of Windsor, Ontario

Kristin Saunders
University of Windsor, Ontario

Stephanie Gee
University of Windsor, Ontario

By conservative estimates between 20 and 25 percent of women will be sexually assaulted in their lifetimes (Laumann et al., 1994; Canadian Panel on Violence against Women, 1993). Girls and women, regardless of their sexual orientation, are most at risk of being sexually assaulted between the ages of 14 and 24 (Laumann et al., 1994; Russell, 1984; Canadian Panel on Violence against Women, 1993). Therefore, efforts to protect women from these experiences must take place prior to or within this ten-year window.

1. This research is funded by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (2005-2006) and the Ontario Women’s Health Council Secretariat through a career award (2005-2008) to the first author.

2. Sexual abuse is not discussed here.
While many sexual assaults occur during the high-school years (Pacifici, Stoolmiller, and Nelson, 2001), there are startling levels of sexual coercion on university campuses across North America (Dekeseredy, Schwartz, and Tait, 1993; Koss, Gidycz, and Wisniewski, 1987). Prospective investigations of sexual coercion have shown that between 11 and 18 percent of university women are sexually coerced or assaulted by men they know within any three- to four-month period (Gidycz et al., 1993; Mac Greene and Navarro, 1998). For this reason, it was the decision of the first author to develop a sexual assault resistance education program for first-year female university students.

The long-term goal of this research program is to reduce completed sexual coercion and sexual assault on Canadian campuses. Even a small reduction in sexual assault would result in a substantial improvement in the safety and the mental and physical health of university women. What we are attempting to achieve with this program is to enhance women’s existing skills and knowledge in order to increase their ability to act in their own self-defence in such a way that maximizes the chances of a good outcome (the end of the coercion or reduction of harm). We are aware that because we developed programs for women rather than for men, we have to fight against the perception that we are holding women responsible for stopping rape. In the development of the program, we were also cognizant that we would have to actively struggle to empower women to act effectively in their own defence, while ensuring that they know that if a sexual assault occurs, the fault lays entirely with the man/men who assaulted them and not with their inability to utilize our teachings. This paper is a partial examination of the success of our journey so far as we walk this tightrope.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT OF DEVELOPMENT OF THE PROGRAM

The foundation of this work is grounded in feminist writing and my thinking about violence against women. Two assertions have threaded themselves through feminist discourse on sexual assault and rape since the beginning of the second wave of the women’s liberation movement. The first is that

3. The team is composed of Charlene Senn (the primary investigator), and Kristin Saunders and Stephanie Gee who were the graduate student research assistants and facilitators of the program, along with other students involved in various portions of the research. Our special thanks are given to undergraduate assistants, Holly Sweet and Jessica Portelli, for their assistance in the first year.

4. First author.
women are physically capable of defending themselves and have the right to defend themselves physically against threats to their sexual and physical integrity (Ullman and Knight, 1992; Bart and O’Brien, 1985). The second, and arguably most important thread, is that (all) men are responsible for stopping rape (Brownmiller, 1975) by eliminating their coercive, abusive, and violent sexual behaviour and changing social norms so that violence against women by other men is not tolerated.

Some feminist researchers, supporting the work of feminist self-defence educators, have concentrated on the first assertion, demonstrating that myths promulgated about women and self-defence are baseless. These myths have included beliefs such as, women who fight back will suffer more injuries, that fighting back only makes rapists angrier, or that most women are not capable of defending themselves against larger men. For example, it is now established wisdom in the research literature in psychology and sociology that women who fight back forcefully, either verbally or physically, are more likely to avoid rape, to reduce the severity of the attack, and to have lower levels of injury than women who use passive strategies (Ullman, 1997). In other words, women’s active and forceful resistance is likely to result in more positive outcomes for them/us.

The second thread in feminist discourse, that men are entirely responsible for the occurrence and cessation of sexual assault, is evident throughout feminist non-academic and academic writing. Feminists have raised public awareness about the many myths regarding rape held by people in North America and elsewhere (Burt, 1980). Efforts to convince society that sexual assault is not rare, that it is most likely to be committed by known men not strangers, and that women are not responsible for their own sexual assaults because of their appearance or behaviour, have been fairly successful, with somewhat improved attitudes toward rape victims (Hinck and Thomas, 1999). However, in the mainstreaming of the feminist message, the important thread that men are responsible for stopping rape has been lost. What is called “rape prevention” on university campuses across North America is almost entirely composed of basic education on the facts of sexual assault and a debunking of rape myths presented to a mixed-gender audience (see Lonsway, 1996; Breitenbecher, 2000 for reviews). While no one would argue that these are not important aspects of the fight against harmful attitudes about sexual assault, no one has demonstrated that either lack of rape knowledge or belief in rape myths leads men to sexually assault women (Schewe and O’Donohue, 1996) nor that teaching women about rape myths is going to protect them from being coerced or forced sexually by a man. Therefore, these efforts are not prevention. They are basic education.
Effective primary prevention efforts would need to focus on men’s behaviour and compel them to stop their sexually coercive and violent behaviour. These types of programs are a minority of all education efforts (Breitenbecher, 2000; Flores and Hartlaub, 1998). What is most disappointing, from a feminist scholar’s standpoint, is that when these interventions are evaluated for their effectiveness in reducing men’s coercive behaviour (and they seldom are) the findings have been largely negative (Breitenbecher, 2000). For instance, one theoretically promising program actually demonstrated backlash effects, where men who took the program were more likely to report that they would be sexually aggressive in the future than men who did not take the program (Berg, Lonsway, and Fitzgerald, 1999). Furthermore, for the minority of programs that have demonstrated positive outcomes, the studies were often methodologically inadequate and the results were unreliable. Few studies actually measure behavioural outcomes (see Linz, Fuson, and Donnerstein, 1990 for an exception) which are needed to indicate the real-world effectiveness of rape prevention programs. And even when other effects are found, they are often not maintained; for example, small attitudinal shifts were no longer evident three months later (Breitenbecher, 2000). Much work still remains to be done before researchers can claim that there are effective sexual assault prevention programs for men.

As feminists and scholars of violence against women then, we are left with the situation we started with; women on university campuses are at high risk of being sexually assaulted by men they know. Thus, until prevention programs for men are effective, we must do the best we can to strengthen women’s abilities to defend themselves against the attacks.

Other feminist or pro-feminist researchers have also adopted this strategy (Hanson and Gidycz, 1993; Gidycz et al., 2006; Marx et al., 2001). Hanson Breitenbecher’s program was a promising start, demonstrating a lower incidence of sexual assault across a university quarter for women who completed the program than for women who had not taken it, but only for women who had never previously been sexually assaulted (Hanson and Gidycz, 1993). A later program trying to extend the effects for previously victimized women was unsuccessful for either group of women (Breitenbecher and Gidycz, 1998). Therefore, the search for effective programs continues.

---

5. This study was published after our program was developed and piloted.
OUR RAPE RESISTANCE PROGRAM AND PROCEDURES

Our project is the result of several years of development and adaptation of the existing best practices of rape resistance. We used Rozee and Koss’ (2001) “AAA: Assess, Acknowledge, Act” theoretical model that had never previously been put into practice (personal communication, Rozee, Aug. 2004), and enhanced it with aspects of Nurius and Norris’ (1996) cognitive ecological model and persuasion theory principles. Due to our extensive use of psychological theory, the sexual assault resistance education program is more theoretically grounded than all but one of the programs described in published studies to date.

Nurius and Norris’ (1996) cognitive ecological model analyzes the origins of obstacles for women in perceiving danger in sexual assault situations and acting in their own self-defence. The ecological aspect of the model acknowledges the multiple levels at which individuals are influenced by their society and other people. These levels include: “(1) the macrosystem, which includes broader cultural values and belief systems, such as the messages pairing male sexual coercion with success and acceptance and the ‘normality’ of sexual coercion […] (2) the ontogeny, or individual development factors, such as dating socialization, assertiveness, and prior experience with sexual victimization; (3) the exosystem, which includes both social units, such as peer influences and relationship variables, and interpersonal goals and expectations; and (4) the microsystem, [which] is defined both in terms of the immediate setting within which a man and woman interact, as well as the woman’s prevailing cognitive appraisal of that context” (Nurius and Norris, 1996, p. 120). Nurius and Norris’ model suggests that we will have the most immediate impact on individual women’s safety by focusing at the microsystem level. If a woman does not perceive danger in an interpersonal situation she is less able to defend herself or resist coercive behaviours. The cognitive aspect of the model stresses that thought processes play a large role in individuals’ attempts to perceive, understand and make meaning of situations (Nurius and Norris, 1996, p. 120). For instance, this model details how social cues present at parties and in other social occasions (alcohol and music associated with fun and enjoyment) may distract women from perceiving danger, how women’s relationship goals (making friends, wanting to be nice or liked, wanting a romantic relationship, etc.) influence their willingness and ability to act on risk cues they do see, and many other cognitive and emotional obstacles to women protecting themselves from assault. Our program therefore focuses on these aspects of sexual assault resistance that are most important for women to know, but which can also be the most difficult for them to learn outside of feminist education.
Persuasion theory principles were also used in the development of the content and the way the program content would be offered to ensure that the components of the program would be well received, remembered and considered relevant by the women who took the program. In brief, persuasion theories such as the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986) describe two major avenues by which people are influenced to change their attitudes or ideas. When people are not fully engaged intellectually (low attention, low interest – things that could be true of a first-year female student at some point in a nine-hour program) they tend to be influenced by indirect routes, or peripheral cues. Peripheral cues are things that influence individuals even though they may actually have very little to do with the content of the message being delivered. They are the intellectual shortcuts that people use when they do not think through arguments fully. For example, expert peer facilitators were used because this theory (and other supporting research) tells us that perceptions of the communicator’s expertise and similarity to the listener/audience are important to both gaining audience attention, and having the message influence them, even when they are paying only limited attention. As a result, a student who is ambivalent about the prospect of spending the next three hours in the program might think, “if someone similar to me (i.e., a female student) but with much more knowledge about sexual assault (i.e., highly trained) says we are all at risk of sexual assault, then it is probably true and this program is important.” The other way people are influenced by education/persuasive messages is when they think about and more deeply process the arguments and information being presented. This is called central route processing. We therefore made sure that the program content would facilitate deeper processing. For example, university-specific statistics were used to promote personal relevance for the women (i.e., that they are personally at risk). This has been shown to be important to central route processing. Under these circumstances, a woman taking the program might think, “if the rates of sexual assault are this high on my own campus then I should really pay attention so I can figure out what I can do to protect myself and help other women I know.”

The structure of the program itself was based on the AAA model of sexual assault resistance (Rozee and Koss, 2001). In order to ensure that theory was incorporated into the program properly and that the women would have time to process the material presented, our program was 7.5 hours in length. This length is considerably longer than other rape resistance programs which are typically 60-90 minutes. The program was offered in three 2.5-hour-long units (one per week for three weeks or collapsed into a single weekend) with each session covering one component of the AAA model. The sessions were co-facilitated by two well-trained female graduate students.
The first program unit was named Assess. In the AAA model, Rozee and Koss describe how women must learn how to assess which situations put them at higher risk for experiencing sexual assault. Women are therefore provided with knowledge of the “real” (i.e., based on research by Rozee, Bateman and Gilmore, 1991; Ullman, 1997 and others) danger cues in situations and in men’s behaviour. When these cues are present, risk of sexual coercion/assault is increased. A good resistance program trains women to assess these situations as dangerous ones, taking into account aspects of the situation such as its isolation, possible escape routes, etc. The women are then given time to practice identifying these cues through various activities.

The second unit is designed to help women to Acknowledge the dangerousness inherent in coercive situations they have identified. As Rozee and Koss point out, “[r]eluctance to label the situation as rape slows [women’s] protective response” (p. 299). In this session, women are provided with a context in which they can question their socialization and any emotional barriers they may personally face so that they can acknowledge risk cues when they are present and take action. This part of the program involves learning more about sexual assault laws and rights, the sexual scripts for both sexes in western cultures and how these relate to coercive practices, as well as common tactics utilized by coercive men (Cleveland, Koss, and Lyons, 1999). The Assess and Acknowledge stages of the program are designed to decrease this time lag and improve assessment of risk through explicit discussion of the balance between desire for a relationship and need for personal safety (Nurius et al., 2004).

The last unit of the program provides women with a range of potential options for Action (resistance) depending on the elements of the situation, the man’s responses, and the success of early strategies. These options are often taught in basic self-defence courses but not within the context of an acquaintance rape situation. For this reason typical self-defence strategies are often rejected by women, because they are reluctant to use tactics such as “keys in the eye” against a man they have been dating or know socially. In fact, the strategies women are most likely to use in acquaintance rape situations are precisely those that men say they are most likely to ignore (Nurius et al., 1996) and are least effective at stopping the coercion or assault (Ullman, 1997, 2002). Our action component of the program therefore includes instruction about how to assess whether an escape is possible, presentation of research evidence on the ineffectiveness of certain tactics and of the effectiveness of forceful verbal and physical resistance, physical self-defence training focused on acquaintance situations, along with a discussion of the myths about the dangers for women in defending themselves (Bart and O’Brien, 1985; Sochting, Fairbrother, and Koch, 2004; Ullman,
1998). This component also includes discussion of the emotional aspects of physically defending one’s self against male acquaintances when the threat demands it.

Because of the program’s content and activities focusing on building women’s knowledge and skills, it is easy to see how sexual assault resistance education could be interpreted as victim blaming. It is critical, therefore, for researchers and other educators to recognize and acknowledge the difficulties of providing these programs in a way that ensures women do not feel responsible for sexual assault. In the following sections, we first describe the participants in the study, and then outline the points in the research project and the pilot phase of the program itself where we walked the tightrope across the abyss of woman blame in sexual assault, trying to avoid perceptions of, and actual, victim blame.

THE PARTICIPANTS

The women who participated in the program were recruited in two ways. We began recruitment through the psychology participant pool at our university in the fall semester. We randomly selected 75 first- and second-year women from the pool to participate in a one-hour survey of women’s sexual and social experiences (the pre-test). We then offered women the opportunity to participate in the rape resistance program. Thirty-six women expressed interest in the program and 22 signed up when they were later contacted. Of those 22, 12 showed up for the program on their assigned night. While this rate of actual attendees to those confirmed was disappointing, we were reassured by our Residence Life Coordinator that this was typical for any event for first-year students and was not specific to our program (personal communication, Tammy Brown, Nov. 2005). In the winter term, additional program participants were recruited through flyers and voice mail invitations in residences. Forty-three women expressed interest and 32 signed up for the program and were pre-tested while 21 showed up for their first program session. We had hoped to offer the program to groups of approximately 15 women, however due to the attrition prior to the program, the actual group size across both semesters ranged from 5 to 8. The 73 women who did not volunteer for the programs or who did not show up for their assigned program were considered the quasi-control group, however only 54 of these women completed the post-test and were therefore used as the final comparison group. All women (control and program) completed post-test measures (45 minutes in length) approximately one week after the conclusion of the program. The final sample ranged in age from 17 to 24 ($M = 18.97; SD = 1.90$).
We evaluated whether women who ended up taking the program were different from women in the quasi-control group on all measured demographic (i.e., age, sexual orientation, relationship status, living situation), experience (i.e., child sexual abuse history, age of first sexual experience, number of sexual partners, consensual sexual experience, coercive sexual experience, dating behaviour), and attitudinal and belief (i.e., fear of rape, perception of risk of rape for self and others, rape myth acceptance, perceived causes of rape, self-defence self-efficacy) variables we had measured. There were no demographic differences except that program women were more likely to live in residence ($p = .01$) than control women, which is not surprising given our recruitment for the program in the dorms during the second semester. There were no experience differences between women who volunteered for the program and those who did not. The only significant difference in attitudes or beliefs between the two groups was that women who volunteered for the program believed that a woman their age was more likely to be a victim of sexual assault by an acquaintance than did women who did not volunteer. However, the two groups did not differ in their perceptions of their personal risk of sexual assault. Marginal differences ($p = .06$) between the groups were found in two Perceived Causes of Rape subscales, with control women exhibiting greater belief in “male pathology” and “female precipitation” as causes of rape. Therefore despite the self-selection into the program, we are confident that pre-existing differences are minor and cannot account for the program outcomes we observed.

**PREPARING TO WALK THE TIGHTROPE – COMMUNICATION ABOUT THE PROJECT**

From the beginning of this project, I realized that I would have to be very careful in my description of this project and why it was focused on female university students. In my application for the first phase of research funding, I came up with an analogy that I thought health funding reviewers would be able to relate to. I stated, “While men alone can stop sexual assault, women can, in some instances, reduce the likelihood that they will be the victim of a completed rape. To use a medical analogy, there is not much a lay-person can do to remove natural pathogens, including viruses from their daily travels. However they can do a number of things to improve their own physical health so that their immune system is strong enough to resist such threats when they are present. This is the logic behind rape resistance education and the proposed research program. While we await successful programs that will reduce or eliminate predatory tendencies in male students, we must work toward extensive rape resistance education for female students.”
I continued to walk the tightrope prior to the start of the program sessions in my interactions with the media and other people who heard about the research. In my preparation, I had not anticipated that I, as a self-identified radical feminist researcher, would be perceived by other feminists as blaming women because of the research program I was developing. My first experience of this was when a short article on my new grant and the rape resistance education research was written by the public relations division of my university. Although they did make a number of errors, (including a misinterpretation of the virus analogy which then implied that I thought rape was as inevitable as the cold virus!), the article in general was not bad. However, those minor twists of my meaning meant that the research could be read as woman-blaming. For example, in a post on a feminist discussion list, referring to the aforementioned article, a young feminist said,

*These recent subtler forms of victim-blaming and “invisibilizing” women (e.g. above article [ref to Senn’s research], or Dr. Phil episode or violence against women workshop you spoke of) ignore men’s responsibility and have somehow managed to twist around the meaning of “women’s equality” to include women’s equal responsibility for violence… a very disturbing trend indeed.* (Post on PAR-L, Oct. 8, 2005, 7:54 pm.)

We can reduce the likelihood of this type of interpretation in the future by insisting (or trying to insist) on final copy approval for media coverage for public dissemination.

**THE TIGHTROPE SWAYS: THE PROGRAM ITSELF**

Perhaps our most challenging encounters with woman blame, however, come from the content and facilitation of our program itself. The majority of the young women who participate in our rape resistance education program have been raised and socialized within North American society, which holds women at least somewhat responsible for being sexually assaulted (Burt, 1980; Sapiro, 1991). Not surprising then, many women start the program with misperceptions about the role women play in sexual assault situations. We knew in advance that skilled facilitators would be needed to negotiate this terrain. Substantial planning and time were devoted to developing the facilitation skills of the two female graduate students who lead the program sessions. These graduate students were required to read a large and varied body of literature on sexual assault and were trained to deal with anticipated women blaming comments from the participants. They were also video recorded in the first year of the program delivery and provided with continual feedback and guidance about negotiating the more difficult comments from the women in the program.
In addition to the comments made by the women who participate in the program, we recognized that in many instances there would be specific program content that these women may themselves perceive as victim blaming. Therefore, great care was taken to identify these areas, and content was developed in order to counter such beliefs.

To set the stage, we introduce the first session of the program by describing the difference between rape prevention and rape resistance so that women would start the program with a clear understanding that only men are responsible for stopping rape. Because this may be the first time that the women in the program are exposed to this idea, we also present them with the virus analogy detailed earlier.

Early in the program, the participants are taught the cues in the environment (*e.g.*, isolation) and in men’s behaviour (*e.g.*, dominance and control) that indicate a higher risk situation for sexual assault (*Rozee, Bateman, and Gilmore, 1991; Ullman, 1997*). We discuss how these risk cues relate to societal dating norms (*e.g.*, men picking up women in their cars, choosing the place, etc.). Time is spent encouraging the participants to brainstorm to come up with some modified dating practices which would help decrease risk (*e.g.*, such as driving their own car, refusing to go to isolated locations, splitting the cost of dates, choosing non-controlling men, etc.) but still meet their social needs. Unfortunately, the nature of the discussion surrounding risk cues has the potential for being perceived as victim blaming because it could be interpreted as promoting the idea that women behave in ways that cause them to be assaulted, and that if women could simply change their behaviour, sexual assault would not occur. In order to counter this idea, we ensure that women understand that assaults only happen because the man in the situation is coercive and that the same behaviour in a situation where the man was non-coercive would never lead to sexual assault.

To highlight this point, and to give the women practice in detecting danger cues and self-protective behaviours, the women are shown two video clips (remade with permission from Hanson and Gidycz, 1993) in which a coercive man attempts to assault his date at a house party. In both clips the man’s coercive behaviour is the same. However, the woman’s behaviour is different in each. In the first video the woman does not engage in self-protective behaviours and, once assaulted, is not able to defend herself against him. In the second video, she does take a number of steps to change the risk of the situation and is therefore able to detect the danger and leave the situation before the assault is completed. This activity is important because it offers a visual reminder that although women can act in self-protective ways, sexual coercion and assault occur because of men’s behaviour.
Once the women have gained proficiency in assessing risk cues for sexual assault, we delve into the very difficult topic of addressing the social and emotional barriers women experience to being able to acknowledge these risk cues when they are present. A conundrum is raised by the reality that many women who have experienced assaults at the hands of men they know report that they ignored their own fears and concerns, that they stomped down on their feelings of unease before the assault and were often left feeling that they should have acted differently (e.g., Nurius et al., 2000; Wood and Rennie, 1994). In fact, self-blame\(^6\) is a common reaction to assaults that rape crisis workers and other feminist therapists work hard to counter (Breitenbecher, 2006; Katz and Burt, 1987). The tightrope therefore becomes more difficult to negotiate when we discuss barriers to acting because we are now focusing on women’s personal emotional responses to assault situations.

In order to reduce the impulse to blame themselves or other women during the discussion of the obstacles to resisting sexual coercion, we focus on the “normality” of emotional and personal goals women have, such as wanting to be liked or desiring a relationship, and our socialization to be “good girls.” We contrast these with other goals women also have, such as strong desires to maintain our bodily and sexual integrity and to have good relationships built on trust and equality. We then discuss the need to tip the balance in our thoughts and actions towards valuing our own safety. We again stress perpetrator responsibility by sharing research findings that show that men understand that women have these personal goals, and that coercive men use this knowledge against women (Cleveland et al., 1999; Harned, 2005).

We also counter victim blame head-on with a powerful video that depicts an assault situation between a man and a woman who have been set up at a small gathering by friends (Simon, 1994). In this video, the inebriated female character is taken back to her dorm by the male character who sexually coerces and then assaults her. She likes the man and is clearly confused by his behaviour. Because she has been drinking and is resisting in a non-forceful manner, it is easy for the program women to initially blame her for being assaulted. We counter victim blame directly by encouraging the women to put themselves in the character’s shoes and identify the myriad of emotions and thoughts she is likely having in this situation. We are able to use this opportunity to again discuss with the participants the

---

6. Breitenbecher (2006) and others have differentiated between the damaging effects of characterological self-blame and the less harmful or even potentially helpful behavioural self-blame. We recognize the importance of the distinction and see it as related to the task we have set ourselves but do not discuss it in detail here.
role that socialization plays (e.g., self-doubt about perceptions, fear of being wrong or embarrassed, pressure to be nice, not to hurt feelings, etc.) in the different types of responses that women can have when they are assaulted. However, the most important aspect of this discussion is that we are able to move the women toward recognizing that in assault situations, there are many things men can do to ensure their partners want to have sex. They come to see that the man in the video is purposely ignoring cues to the contrary. We emphasize that it is not only the man’s personal responsibility, but also his legal responsibility to ensure that the woman wants to engage in sexual activity.

Using a different video (Coulter, 2005) and exercise created at Queen’s University (one section of Dating Basics Kit) a little later on, we facilitate a discussion of the miscommunication hypothesis which we believe we need to directly challenge to avoid woman blaming in sexual assault. The miscommunication hypothesis (McCaw and Senn, 1998; based on Muehlenhard, 1988 and others) refers to the perception or belief that sexual assault occurs in many situations because of misunderstandings between men and women. Despite many challenges to this theory (e.g., McCaw and Senn, 1998), undergraduates are exposed to it in their textbooks, in newspapers, on television, and in movies, so it is an issue that must be confronted (Corcoran, 1992). While watching the video, we ask the program women to gather evidence that miscommunication is not happening. During the discussion about the video, we acknowledge that in assault situations women may, for example, smile or act politely while they are demurring instead of forcefully resisting because of our socialization to be “nice” and “good.” However, we present research to show that men do understand that even these non-forceful actions are in fact refusals, and that the full range of women’s responses in assault situations are clearly refusals to men (Frith and Kitzinger, 1997; McCaw and Senn, 1998; O’Byrne, Rapley, and Hansen, 2006). To illustrate our point further, we also discuss the research that documented more than half of men admit that they will not stop trying to engage in sexual activity with a woman until she says “no” more than once (Muehlenhard, Andrews, and Beal, 1996), reports that men are more likely to honour women’s refusals if they are concerned about what the woman thinks about them (Nurius et al., 1996), as well as claims that men are less likely to accept women’s refusals in earlier stages of dating (Quinn et al., 1991).

On the other hand, we address the grain of truth in the miscommunication hypothesis by encouraging the program participants to be verbally assertive when they are not interested in engaging in sexual activity. We frame this as being yet another self-protective practice because if they are sure that they were crystal clear in their communication of refusal then they will more quickly feel justified in verbally and physically resisting men
who attempt to assault them, and fast responses maximize their chances of escape. Moreover, in the aftermath of a sexual assault they would also be clear that what happened was sexual assault despite the man’s possible claims to the contrary (Wood and Rennie, 1994) and would be in a position to immediately access appropriate services such as rape crisis centres and/or the police.

As mentioned previously, a large portion of the final session of the rape resistance program focuses on teaching the women self-defence with a focus on defence against acquaintances. Before teaching the actual self-defence techniques we spend time promoting the idea of being prepared and emotionally ready to physically defend themselves against men they know. During this self-defence component we thoroughly examine what self-defence strategies are most and least effective based on the best research available (e.g., Ullman, 1997; Ullman and Knight, 1992). We recognize that while we are doing this, there is a possibility that women may judge and perhaps blame themselves because of the strategies that they have used to deal with men’s sexually coercive or assaultive behaviour in the past. In order to counter this self-blame, we frame the lesson within the context of looking forward and not backward (based on the idea from Morrison, 1990). We emphasize that no matter what they may have done in the past to get through an assault situation, it was effective because they are here now and survival is successful resistance. Our focus, we explain, is to teach them additional tools that they can use to defend themselves so that they have a broader range of options if they are confronted by a coercive man in the future.

Throughout the entire program, we work to empower women by demonstrating that they are not only worth defending, but also that it is their legal right to defend themselves from harm. We provide them with knowledge, skills, and practice so that they can increase their power and control in making decisions to protect themselves. However, in the next breath we always remind them that no matter what choices they do make, or what actions they do or do not do, they are never responsible for being sexually assaulted.

ARE WE SAFELY WALKING THE TIGHTROPE?
PRELIMINARY EVIDENCE OF SUCCESS

So far we have outlined our struggles and strategies to stay on the tightrope and to avoid the tumble off into woman blame. We would like now to provide some evidence from our pilot testing that we are indeed keeping
our balance. As described earlier, our sample is based on the first 34 women who took the program during the first year of pilot tests compared to a no-program quasi-control group\(^7\) \(n = 54\). As part of our post-program survey battery we included two measures of attitudes and beliefs about rape. The first was the *Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale – Short Form* (IRMA-SF: Payne, Lonsway, and Fitzgerald, 1999). In reviews of various rape myth acceptance scales (Lonsway and Fitzgerald, 1994), many psychometric problems were identified. Lonsway and her colleagues developed the IRMA to counter these criticisms. The IRMA has the strongest psychometric properties of any scale having excellent criterion-related validity (correlations with well-known measures of sexism and hostility toward women) and reliability. Internal consistency is high (Cronbach’s alpha above 0.82 in the original article and our study). The short form has been very widely used by researchers since the late 1990s. Examples of the 20 items answered on a seven-point Likert-type scale from *not at all agree* to *very much agree* are, “If a woman is raped while she is drunk, she is at least somewhat responsible for letting things get out of control,” “It is usually only women who dress suggestively that are raped.” Our Canadian sample had somewhat higher scores on the scale (average 2.5 on items) than women of a comparable age in Payne *et al.*’s U.S. sample (average 2.1). Women who were provided with the program decreased their belief in rape myths significantly from pre- \((M = 50.29, SD = 3.13)\) to one week post-program \((M = 44.57, SD = 3.14)\) and maintained these lower scores for at least three months \((M = 43.30, SD = 3.23)\) compared to women who were not in the programs who maintained their scores around a mean of approximately 50, \(F(1,42) = 3.79, p < 0.05\).\(^8\)

The second measure of interest here is the *Perceived Causes of Rape Scale* (Cowan and Campbell, 1995; revised, Cowan and Quinton, 1997). This measure “provides [an] assessment of a range of people’s beliefs about the causes of rape that are not exclusively rape myths” (Cowan and Quinton, 1997, p. 228). This 32-item scale (revised version) provides participants with the stem “Rape is caused by ....” and they must answer for a list of causes on a seven-point Likert scale from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*. The factor structure of the scale is well defined for 6 factors/subscales and accounts for 61.9% of the variance. While all items were given to ensure that the scale’s integrity was maintained, we were primarily interested in the *Female Precipitation* six-item subscale. This subscale has excellent internal

---

7. The full experimental test of the program occurred in 2006-2007 with results currently pending.
8. Only 44 women completed the unplanned three-month follow-up so sample size is reduced here. In all cases the pre- to post- changes are similar to the full sample results.
consistency with a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.90 reported by the authors and replicated in our sample. Test-retest reliability is also good. Validity for the scale has been demonstrated in a number of ways. The subscales do not correlate with social desirability (discriminant validity). Female Precipitation is negatively correlated with feminist self-identification and support for the women’s movement (Cowan and Quinton, 1997). We are therefore confident that the scale is a good one. Our sample (control and program combined) had much lower beliefs in female precipitation (average 2.6 on items) than did the women in Cowan and Quinton’s and Cowan and Campbell’s U.S. samples (average 3.4-3.6) from a decade ago. Women who completed the program experienced a significant drop in their subscale scores (pre: $M = 13.54$, $SD = 5.68$; post: $M = 9.36$, $SD = 4.77$) which include beliefs that, for example, “Rape is caused by women who tease men” or “Rape is caused by women’s use of drugs or alcohol,” whereas control women did not (pre: $M = 15.82$, $SD = 7.35$; post: $M = 15.55$, $SD = 8.04$), $F(2,41) = 3.57$, $p < .05$. This was true even though women who took the program already had somewhat lower ($p = .06$) beliefs in female precipitation to begin with. We are therefore confident that we have not communicated inadvertently that women are responsible in any way for sexual assault even though we discuss the increased risks for women when alcohol is present (consumed by either person) and other difficult issues. These results suggest that program facilitators and other educators can carefully lead discussions of risk without removing responsibility for the assault from the male perpetrators.

CONCLUSION

We continue to walk the tightrope in our program, always making sure that we empower women to make healthy choices, to know and stand up for their rights, and to fight back (verbally and/or physically) when a man is sexually coercive. Because we recognize that some of the women who have participated in the program will experience a sexual assault, or they will know someone else who will, we provide them with the information necessary to deal with any sexual assault perpetrated against them or their friends and family. We stress that if they are assaulted, they need to remember that they are not responsible and have a right to demand care and justice, no matter what they said, did or did not do, prior to, during, or following the assault. In our view, ongoing vigilance to these issues and to the reality that it is a tightrope we are walking, will make our programs more effective and women safer. But of course, the real answer is still that we require social change and education efforts to enhance women’s equality and to create a new norm where male violence against women is unthinkable.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


