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Sexual Violence on Campus: Differences Across Gender and Sexual Minority Status

 Alexa Martin-Storey, Ph.D. ^{a,*}, Geneviève Paquette, Ph.D. ^a, Manon Bergeron, Ph.D. ^b,
 Jacinthe Dion, Ph.D. ^c, Isabelle Daigneault, Ph.D. ^d, Martine Hébert, Ph.D. ^e, and Sandrine Ricci, M.A. ^f
^a Groupe de recherche sur les inadaptations sociales de l'enfance, Département de Psychoéducation, Université de Sherbrooke, Sherbrooke, Québec, Canada

^b Département de sexologie, Université du Québec à Montréal, Montréal, Québec, Canada

^c Département des sciences de la santé, Centre de recherche interdisciplinaire sur les problèmes conjugaux et les agressions sexuelles, Université du Québec à Chicoutimi, Saguenay, Canada

^d Département de Psychologie, Université de Montréal, Montréal, Québec, Canada

^e Canada Research Chair in Interpersonal Traumas and Resilience, Département de sexologie, Université du Québec à Montréal, Montréal, Québec, Canada

^f Département de sociologie, Université de Québec à Montréal, Montréal, Québec, Canada

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 A B S T R A C T

Purpose: Sexual violence is a pervasive problem on university campuses. Although previous work has documented greater vulnerability for sexual violence among sexual and gender minority students, little is known about contextual variation in vulnerability to this kind of violence. The goals of the current study were (1) to identify vulnerability among sexual and gender minority students with regard to sexual violence, and (2) to explore if the context of this violence differs across sexual and gender minority status.

Methods: Undergraduate students (ages 18–24) from six francophone universities in Quebec, Canada (N = 4,264) completed online questionnaires regarding their experience of sexual violence, as well as the context of these acts (e.g., the gender of the perpetrator, the status of the perpetrator, and the location of the violence). They also provided information regarding their sexual and gender minority status. Binary logistic regressions were conducted to assess for variation in experiencing sexual violence across sexual and gender minority status.

Results: Transgender/nonbinary students generally reported higher levels of sexual violence than their cisgender peers, while variation occurred with regard to vulnerability across sexual identity subgroups. Few differences in context were observed across sexual minority identity. Transgender/nonbinary students were significantly more likely to report sexual violence in athletic contexts and during volunteering activities compared to their cisgender peers.

Conclusions: Findings highlight the higher levels of vulnerability for sexual violence among gender minority and some sexual minority university students. They also point to the contexts in which such violence occurs, suggesting specific strategies for prevention.

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IMPLICATIONS AND CONTRIBUTION

This study highlights variation in risk for different forms of sexual violence across a range of sexual and gender identities, in multiple contexts. Findings suggest that trans/nonbinary students may be particularly vulnerable to this kind of violence, and that empirically validated interventions to improve the university context for these students in particular are urgently needed.

* Address correspondence to: Alexa Martin-Storey, Ph.D., Groupe de recherche sur les inadaptations sociales de l'enfance, Département de Psychoéducation, Université de Sherbrooke, Pavillon A7, 2500 Boul. de l'Université, Sherbrooke, Québec, Canada.

E-mail address: alexa.martin@gmail.com (A. Martin-Storey).

Sexual violence, including sexual harassment (i.e., verbal and nonverbal behaviors that are sexual in nature and reflect hostile and degrading attitudes), unwanted sexual behavior (i.e., a range of behaviors in which the perpetrator has or attempts to have unwanted sexual contact including, but not limited to, sexual

assault), or sexual coercion (i.e., when an individual feels extorted or incentivized into unwanted sexual activity), is prevalent among university students [1–3], and is increasingly the focus of research because of its serious consequences for health and academic achievement [4,5]. The current study employed the *Enquête sur la sexualité, la sécurité et les interactions en milieu universitaire*, [6] a large-scale study of sexual violence among university students in Quebec, Canada, to better understand vulnerability to sexual violence across sexual and gender minority status.

Sexual minority (i.e., having sexual identities other than heterosexual) and gender minority (i.e., gender identities that differ from the gender assigned at birth, such as transgender and non-binary) university students are at greater risk for sexual violence when compared to their heterosexual or cisgender peers (i.e., gender identities that align with those assigned at birth) [3,7–9]. While specific rates of sexual violence vary according to the definition employed, research on sexual assault indicates that cisgender men report the lowest levels of sexual assault, followed by cisgender women, whereas transgender or nonbinary individuals report rates twice to three times as high as those reported by cisgender women [7–9]. Similarly, students with gay, lesbian, or bisexual identities or individuals who are unsure of their identities report higher levels of sexual assault when compared to heterosexual students [7,10–12]. Finally, variation occurs within sexual minority identities, such that some [7,8,10], but not all, studies [13] find higher rates of sexual violence among individuals with bisexual identities compared to individuals with gay or lesbian identities. Young adults increasingly endorse sexual identities outside of traditional sexual minority categories such as queer (e.g., a sexual identity associated with patterns of attraction that reject gender binaries) or pansexual [14], and it is unknown if students with these identities are at greater risk for sexual violence.

Two theories combine to provide a framework for explaining vulnerability for sexual violence among sexual and gender minority students. First, Minority Stress Theory [15] proposes that higher vulnerability to victimization among sexual and gender minorities results from the stigma associated with these identities. Indeed, sexual victimization, and especially sexual harassment, may sometimes be an overt manifestation of homophobia or transphobia [16]. Second, Routine Activity Theory, and, more specifically, feminist adaptations of this theory, suggests that engagement in certain kinds of routine activities place the individual at increased risk for experiencing sexual violence [17]. For instance, higher levels of vulnerability to dating violence among bisexual-identified compared to lesbian-identified women may reflect differences in exposure to intimate relations with men [9]. The two theories together, moreover, provide additional insight into when and how sexual and gender minorities are more likely to experience sexual violence. Indeed, sexual/gender-minority stressors may lead to behaviors (e.g., higher alcohol use, internalized homophobia, or violence perpetration) that place these individuals in contexts where they may be more likely to experience sexual violence [9,11,18]. Finally, Routine Activity Theory also suggests the importance of understanding if and how the contexts of sexual violence vary across gender or sexual minority status for university students. Indeed, gender of the perpetrator, the status of the perpetrator, or the physical context in which these acts occur may provide important information for understanding who is at risk and when. Understanding if sexual and gender minority individuals experience

sexual violence in the same contexts as their peers is essential for developing effective prevention strategies.

The overarching goal of the current study was to better understand variations in the rates of sexual harassment, unwanted sexual behavior including sexual assault, and sexual coercion among undergraduate students according to gender and sexual minority status. The current study offers several advantages over previous studies, including diverse options for sexual minority identity, detailed information about the contexts of university-based sexual violence, and the assessment of sexual violence specifically on campus or in university-based settings (i.e., between two members of the university community off-campus). Based on previous research, we anticipated (1) that gender and sexual minority students would report higher rates of sexual violence than their cisgender and heterosexual peers, and (2) that the contexts in which sexual violence was experienced (e.g., the gender and hierarchical status of the perpetrator and the physical context where the violence occurred), would differ significantly according to gender and sexual minority status.

Methods

Participants

Following approval from the ethics review boards at six universities, members of the university community were invited to participate in the *Enquête Sexualité, Sécurité et Interactions en Milieu Universitaire* [6]. This study addressed experiences of university-based sexual violence via online solicitation, posters, and listserves between January and May 2016. A total of 12,117 participants in the university community completed an online survey, of whom 5,706 were undergraduate students (47%). The current sample consisted of the undergraduate participants who (1) were between the ages of 18–25 (1,415 individuals excluded) and (2) had provided information about their sexual and gender identities (27 individuals excluded), for a total of 4,264 participants. These criteria were used to capture typically aged undergraduate students, and because sexual and gender minority identity were key variables in the current study. Included participants were more likely than excluded participants to report sexual harassment ($F = 24.36, p < .01$) and unwanted sexual behavior ($F = 20.39, p < .01$). Descriptive statistics of the final sample, by gender, are presented in Table 2.

Measures

Sexual violence. Sexual violence was measured using a French adaptation of the Sexual Experiences Questionnaire [19], which has previously been used to assess sexual violence among university populations with definitions consistent with the guidelines from the Center for Disease Control [20,21]. This scale includes a total of 21 items and three subscales: *sexual harassment* (eight items; $\alpha = .83$; example: did someone make insulting or hurtful comments that were sexual in nature), *unwanted sexual behavior* (seven items; $\alpha = .82$; example: did someone have sexual relations with you against your will), and *sexual coercion* (six items; $\alpha = .72$; example: did someone make you afraid of reprisals if you did not engage in sexual activity). Three of the questions on the unwanted sexual behavior scale addressed unwanted sexual behaviors with contact. To increase comparability to previous research on sexual assault, a separate scale looking exclusively at unwanted sexual behavior with contact was included in the anal-

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