

An Inherently Masculine Practice: Understanding the Sexual Victimization of Queer Women

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Nicole Bedera¹  and Kristjane Nordmeyer²

Abstract

Sexual violence is a widespread social issue, and sexual victimization is especially prevalent among queer-identified women. Still, there is little research on queer women's experiences of sexual violence or explanations for the high rate of victimization. This study uses data from 40 open-ended interviews to investigate queer women's experiences with sexual violence and those who perpetrate it. Respondents answered questions about the characteristics of their sexual assaults and perpetrators, as well as connections the survivors perceive between their sexual assaults and sexual identities. Findings indicate that the perpetrators of such sexual assaults invoke an expression of masculinity, regardless of the perpetrator's gender identity at the time of violence. To understand the nuanced role of masculinity in queer assailant's assaults, we develop the concept of "righteous masculinity," which refers to a traditional (and, in this case, violent) masculinity invoked by marginalized people in an attempt to reclaim power. We find that sexual violence against queer women is an especially powerful way to enact masculinity through drawing upon misogyny and homophobia simultaneously, providing an explanation for the high rates of sexual victimization among queer women. We argue that centering masculinity can help scholars and activists better challenge the

¹University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, USA

²Westminster College, Salt Lake City, UT, USA

Corresponding Author:

Nicole Bedera, University of Michigan, Room 3115 LSA Building, 500 S. State Street, Ann Arbor, MI 48109, USA.

Email: nbedera@umich.edu

sexual victimization of queer women and deepen understanding of the links between gender-based violence and masculinity.

Keywords

sexual assault, LGBTQ, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, perpetration, masculinity

Introduction

Sexual violence is extremely common among queer-identified women and severely under-researched. The Centers for Disease Control estimates that 46% of lesbian women and 75% of bisexual women will experience a sexual assault during their lifetimes (Walters et al., 2013). On college campuses, queer women face some of the highest risks of sexual abuse with 19% of lesbian women and 32% of bisexual women reporting at least one instance of sexual assault during their undergraduate careers (Cantor et al., 2015). Queer women also have a unique experience of sexual trauma. In addition to common traumatic symptoms following sexual victimization, queer women report higher levels of depression and uncomfortable experiences with health care providers and sexual stigma when seeking resources, as well as other types of institutional betrayal (Logie et al., 2014; Smith et al., 2016). Lack of understanding about the realities of violence against lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) people leads many queer victims to eschew seeking resources altogether, especially when they are multiply marginalized (Calton et al., 2015; Guadalupe-Diaz & Yglesias, 2013). Still, there is limited research on why adult queer women are at such a high risk for sexual violence. Previous studies focus primarily on how queer women's behaviors such as alcohol consumption, engagement in sex with multiple partners, and gender presentation could be connected to the high rates of sexual violence they experience (Gilmore et al., 2014; Hequembourg et al., 2013). The present study seeks to investigate whether a queer identity itself can lead a woman to become a target for sexual victimization and identify the mechanisms through which queer women are targeted. Based on our findings, we argue that perpetrators' invocation of masculinity and homophobia are central in queer women's sexual victimization, taking the form of both hegemonic and what we term "righteous" masculinity.

Terminology

Throughout this article, we use a variety of technical terms to refer to the violence participants experienced, and we use each of these terms in slightly

different ways. In general, we use the phrase “sexual assault” to refer to individual experiences of nonconsensual sexual touching and “sexual violence” in reference to sexual assault as a social problem. “Sexual victimization” refers to the processes through which victims are targeted for sexual assault, and “sexual trauma” refers to the traumatic symptoms experienced by sexual assault victims. We use “abuse” to refer to instances of violence that include but are not limited to sexual assault (e.g., intimate partner violence).

Similarly, we have made intentional choices about how to refer to the participants’ sexual identities. Individually, we refer to each participant using the sexual identity (or identities) they disclosed to us. Collectively, we have decided to use the word “queer” as nearly all participants self-identified as “queer” at some point during their interviews, but many took issue with more limiting labels such as lesbian and bisexual.

Masculinity

It may seem odd to begin to understand queer women’s sexual victimization through a discussion of masculinity, but there are many reasons to do so. Most obviously, the overwhelming majority of perpetrators of sexual assaults affecting queer women are men (Hequembourg et al., 2013; Walters et al., 2013). In fact, previous research indicates that most violence affecting LGBTQ populations more broadly is perpetrated by individuals external to the LGBTQ community (McKay et al., 2019). In addition, we argue that even when the perpetrator of a sexual assault is not a cisgender man, masculinity still plays a central role in sexual violence against queer women.

The discussion of sexual violence and masculinity is connected most clearly to hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1987). Hegemonic masculinity describes a hierarchy of gendered power that privileges certain masculinities over others. To gain ascendancy in the gendered hierarchy, men (or any other type of masculine-presenting person) must “do gender” and have their performances of masculinity validated by other social actors (West & Zimmerman, 1987). As noted by Connell (1987), the enactment of masculinity does not require violence, but violence is compatible with hegemonic performances of masculinity as a particularly effective form of oppressive domination. Researchers have long known that the “rewards” assailants receive from committing acts of sexual violence are connected to masculinity and power, such as gaining access to unavailable women, engaging in adventurous sex, or bonding with other men (Quinn, 2002; Sanday, 2007; Scully & Marolla, 1985). Men’s willingness to use sexual violence as a means of securing masculine status is especially pronounced when they are relegated to a “subordinate masculinity”—or a non-dominant and less powerful

masculinity—and their place in the hierarchy of hegemonic masculinity has been threatened (Messerschmidt, 2000). Similarly, men whose masculinity has been threatened are more likely to blame victims and to exonerate perpetrators when confronted with sexual assault narratives (Munsch & Willer, 2012). Even men who seek to push back on hegemonic masculinity through invoking a hybrid masculinity that celebrates subordinated masculinities and femininities may still reproduce gendered hierarchies that permit violence to occur (Bridges, 2010; Bridges & Pascoe, 2014; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Pascoe & Hollander, 2016).

While the bulk of the academic literature focuses on cisgender men's enactments of masculinity and its link to sexual violence, there is reason to believe that similar principles may operate in other masculine-identified populations. For example, there is ample evidence that transgender and gender non-conforming individuals face pressure to conform to traditional gender norms to gain recognition for their gender identities, unintentionally (and understandably) reifying gendered systems (Dewey, 2008; Gagné et al., 1997; Garrison, 2018). Furthermore, individuals (e.g., LGBTQ folks) who adopt hybrid masculinities may not have done so voluntarily, but rather in response to subordinated status or other community pressures that might not intentionally or effectively resist hegemonic masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005); for example, out queer-identified men do not have access to hegemonic masculinity because of their sexual identities, relegating their enactments of masculinity to subordinated status even if they still act in a way that reinforces gender hierarchy. Even research on cisgender female offenders finds that they invoke similar perpetration tactics to men in their abuse, often at the urging of a masculine co-offender or after learning how to abuse through their own experiences as victims of male offenders (Bernardi & Steyn, 2019; Kaufman et al., 1995). For these reasons, we argue that it is important to consider the role of masculinity in sexual violence even when the assailants are not cisgender heterosexual men.

Queer Bodies

Previous research indicates that queer bodies and gender presentations are often interpreted as a threat to masculinity and heterosexuality (Glick et al., 2007), even by other members of the queer community (Hunt et al., 2016). Accordingly, some scholars have called to link the study of violence against LGBTQ people to masculinity theories (Kelley & Gruenewald, 2014). While most of the previous research on this topic is concerned with queer men's bodies, we argue that queer women's bodies also pose a masculinity threat and are at additional risk in a society that views them as appropriate outlets for sexual violence.

Violence against queer women takes place within the context of compulsory heterosexuality (Rich, 1980) in which women are assumed heterosexual and positioned as gatekeepers against men's normalized sexually aggressive behavior (Hlvaka, 2014). In this context, queer women are viewed as sexually available to heterosexual men, regardless of their self-proclaimed sexual orientations, and as particularly appropriate objects of sexualized violence, labeled as promiscuous, untrustworthy, sluts, sex objects, or as potential threesome participants (Chmielewski, 2017; Johnson & Grove, 2017; Ochs, 2011) and regarded as "tokens" that men accumulate in their competition with other men for social status (Chmielewski, 2017). As a means of rationalization, bisexual women's sexual identities are questioned and criticized for an inability to "choose a side" (Chmielewski, 2017; Ochs, 2011) and lesbian women are accused of sexual transgressions of their own through "converting" supposedly straight women to lesbianism (Meyer, 2012). For queer women of color, there is an added dimension of their sexual identities being viewed as creating "harm" to their communities (Meyer, 2012), as well as increased surveillance and hypersexualization in their everyday lives (Chmielewski, 2017; Crenshaw, 1991). The harmful perpetuation of these stereotypes is not only limited to heterosexuals but also persists in members of the queer community through internalized oppression (Herek et al., 2009; Lorde, 1984) and identity abuse (Woulfe & Goodman, 2018), which has been connected to relationship quality and the perpetration of interpersonal violence within queer communities (Balsam & Szymanski, 2005; Frost & Meyer, 2009).

Current Study

The current study seeks to explore the relationship between violent performances of masculinity and the designation of queer women's bodies as acceptable objects for violence. In doing so, we seek to explain queer women's high rates of sexual victimization. In the sections to follow, we draw upon queer women's reports of their sexual assaults and memories of their perpetrators, including their verbalized motivations for committing acts of sexual violence and invocations of their victims' sexualities throughout the assaults.

Data and Method

Participants

The data from this study come from 40 surveys and open-ended interviews conducted between July 2016 and February 2018 with queer-identified

women who were sexually assaulted during college. We used a variety of recruitment techniques to ensure a sizable and diverse sample, including recruiting through community organizations in two states that provide services for either LGBTQ individuals or sexual assault survivors, sharing an invitation to participate in research in online forums for LGBTQ academics, making announcements about the study in sociology and gender studies courses, and advertising the study in more private spaces like bathroom stalls. All respondents were invited to participate in a study about lesbian and bisexual women's experiences with sexual assault during college. Our recruitment materials did not include the word "queer." We anticipate that explicitly recruiting survivors has led to a selection effect in our study. Most (but not all) of the respondents we interviewed found their sexual assaults traumatizing and to be substantial events in their life courses. In addition, we imagine that survivors who experienced rape are overrepresented in our study, as survivors often normalize other types of sexual assault (Hlvaka, 2014; Holland & Cortina, 2017). Respondents were notified that they would receive a US\$40 gift card as compensation for their participation.

Although we relied on convenience sampling, the respondents are diverse. All but one respondent identified as a woman, with one identifying as gender-queer and feminine.¹ Just under half of the sample identified as bisexual, 12 respondents identified as queer, six as lesbians, three as pansexual, and one as demi-sexual.² Respondents ranged from 18 to 31 years of age with a mean age of 23. The majority of the sample identified as White, four respondents identified as of Middle Eastern descent, three as black, three as Asian American, and two as White and Hispanic. Respondents lived in 10 different states and three different countries at the time of their sexual assaults. They attended 25 different colleges, including public universities, private liberal arts colleges, religious colleges, Ivy League universities, and a women's college. Their assailants were a mix of college students and other community members. For an overview of the respondents' demographics, see Table 1.

Many of the respondents in our study were sexually assaulted multiple times during their college years. During their interviews, some respondents reported as many as four sexual assaults, with multiple respondents commenting that they had more experiences they could have shared.³ Our data set includes in-depth interviews on more than 65 discrete events of sexual violence.⁴

Method

We used open-ended interviews to explore queer women's experiences with sexual violence in college. We used a grounded theory approach and

Table 1. Demographic Composition of the Sample.

Demographic	Representation	
	<i>n</i>	%
Gender		
Woman	39	97.5
Genderqueer	1	2.5
Sexual orientation		
Bisexual	18	45.5
Lesbian	6	15.0
Queer	12	30.0
Pansexual	3	7.5
Demi-sexual	1	2.5
Age		
Range		18–31
Mean		23
Race		
Non-Hispanic White	28	70.0
Middle Eastern	4	10.0
Black	3	7.5
Asian American	3	7.5
Hispanic White	2	5.0

trauma-based interview methods to allow respondents as much control over the interviews as possible (Bedera & Nordmeyer, 2017; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). We asked respondents to provide detailed descriptions of their sexual assaults, including explicit questions about their perpetrators and the dialogue exchanged leading up to, during, and after the violence that occurred. We also asked respondents about whether they thought their sexual assaults might have been motivated by their sexual orientations. These questions were situated in a broader interview that also included questions about their traumatic responses to their sexual assaults and the impact of the violence on their relationships and sexual identities. In addition, we asked follow-up questions for clarity or to further explore a topic introduced by the respondent. In doing so, we mirrored language used by the respondents, including their common use of words like “masculine” and “domineering” to describe their assailants’ behavior. We allowed respondents to decide which experiences they wanted to label as sexual assault and discuss during our interviews. If a respondent ever said they felt unsure about whether or not a certain experience rose to the level of sexual assault, we encouraged them to share

the experience and followed up with questions about the source of their uncertainty. Most commonly, respondents disclosed their experiences with either oral, vaginal, or anal rape (88%); however, respondents also told other stories of sexual assault, such as unwanted sexual touching of their breasts or buttocks or forced manual stimulation of an assailant. Interviews lasted between 28 and 134 min, with a mean interview length of 64 min. Most variation in length is reflective of the number of sexual assaults a respondent chose to disclose. Respondents also completed a survey about their demographic characteristics and adult experiences with sexual violence (Sexual Experiences Survey-Long Form Victimization [SES-LFV]; Koss et al., 2006, 2007). We do not use the data from their survey results in this article; however, we believe that completing the survey helped prepare respondents to remember previous sexual assaults and prepare to answer interview questions about them.

Drawing on work of previous scholars (Kaufman et al., 1995; Pfeffer, 2016), we use women's narratives to explore the processes by which other actors affect them, specifically the perpetrators of the sexual assaults they endured. Relying entirely on survivors' narratives limits our ability to know the motives of the assailants with certainty; however, it is possible that the use of aggregated survivor narratives is more reliable than perpetrators' retrospective accounts, which are known to have a strong response bias, including the denial and rationalization of violent acts (Scully & Marolla, 1984). In contrast, researchers have demonstrated that survivors' narratives of violence are generally reliable (Lonsway, 2010) and are voices of authority on the violence they endured who can offer valuable information about the actions of perpetrators (Kaufman et al., 1995).

During our analysis, we used Dedoose qualitative coding software. We began by coding broadly for any mention of a perpetrator of a sexually violent act and for references to and enactments of masculinity, which was a persistent and surprising theme in the open coding of our research memos, even though none of our prepared questions referenced masculinity. We also coded for instances in which a respondent mentioned masculinity or men in describing the impact sexual victimization had on her. The two authors discussed each excerpt and reached a consensus about the codes applied. After identifying the excerpts that included some reference to masculinity, we used open coding to look for themes within them, finding that patterns mapped onto both the respondents' and their assailants' sexual and gender identities. We used this as the organizing framework for this article. Throughout our analysis, we use pseudonyms and omitted potentially identifying information to maintain the confidentiality of the respondents. We made small edits for clarity. As the perceived gender identity of an assailant is a key component of

our analysis, we decided not to change the pronouns for respondents' assailants who may have been misgendered in quotes by respondents.⁵ In our analyses, we use the pronouns they and them as we are uncertain about the assailants' current gender identities.

Findings

Overwhelmingly, the assailants described in this study were cisgender men. Out of the 67 sexual assault events captured in the data, 57 were perpetrated by one or multiple cisgender men. Of the remaining cases, eight sexual assaults were perpetrated by someone who at the time or has since come to identify as transgender or genderqueer and two were perpetrated by a pair with differing gender expressions. There were no sexual assaults in this study perpetrated by a lone cisgender woman. All cases involved a masculine-identified perpetrator and all of the violence that occurred had some connection to a masculine gender expression.

In the sections to follow, we describe the way the assailants' invocations of masculinity differ based on the respondents' sexual identities and the assailants' sexual and/or gender identities. In general, we find that cisgender men deployed masculinity based on the sexual identity of their victim. More specifically, lesbian women were regarded as sexual challenges and bisexual women were regarded as kinky or otherwise sexually uncontrollable women to be dominated. Queer assailants used many of the same tactics and rhetoric as cisgender assailants, but they rationalized their violence differently to their victims. Drawing on their own subordinated identities, they cast their violence as a "righteous" expression of a masculinity denied to them by society more broadly due to the queer identities they held.

Cisgender Men and Queer Bodies

Commonly, the respondents in this study were sexually assaulted by heterosexual cisgender men who knew their victims' sexual orientations and invoked their sexual identities leading up to, during, or in reference to the violence that occurred. During these references, the assailants attempted to bolster their own masculinities through dominance of the respondents' queer bodies. The form of this dominance varied by the perceived sexual identity of the respondent: Lesbian women were dominated through sexual conquest while bisexual women met hostility to their sexual identities and were subjected to taboo sexual acts.

Lesbian women reported that they were often perceived as sexual challenges or markers of sexual prowess. As lesbians are generally unwilling to

have sex with cisgender men, those who could achieve sexual contact with a lesbian broadcast it as evidence of their exceptional sexual desirability. Brittany, a Black 20-year-old queer woman, was targeted by a man engaging in a sexual competition with a friend because the pair perceived her as a lesbian. During her interview, she recounted a statement her rapist made to the court during the sentencing for her case when asked how he selected her as a victim:

Brittany: From what I understand [from] the way it was said at trial or whatever was—it was literally like they would scout out girls to have sex with and they usually were women that didn't have like a—I don't know—they were single or they were just highly vulnerable or susceptible to attention and would react well essentially. Like that was the entire point. So, you know, they'd have that happen and it'd been successful with all these people and then I guess [my rapist] was just really intrigued by the fact that I was queer.

Researcher: Would he use the word queer? Was there a specific way he thought about lesbian or bisexual . . .

Brittany: He-he said lesbian . . . There are all these women that he's convinced to have sex with him or whatever and like whatever that looks like, but he'd never gone after somebody that was a lesbian. That was the wow factor.

Brittany's assailant indicated in court that he saw her as a challenging sexual conquest that would demonstrate his sexual power—and, accordingly, masculinity—to his friend.

Similarly, Lydia, a White 20-year-old lesbian woman, mentioned that her sexuality seemed to bolster her assailant's view of his own sexual abilities. Following the sexual assault, Lydia and her assailant briefly engaged in a consensual sexual relationship as she questioned the legitimacy of her sexual orientation and the rape itself. At the time, she was beginning to date a woman, which she believed pleased her assailant. She explained,

I think he just likes me or maybe thinks that I'm, like, more unattainable because he does know my girlfriend now and has met her—had met her—I think had known about her while we were—like, [he] had known I was starting to see her when I wanted to have sex with him those other times. And I think it made him, like, feel good that I wanted to have sex with him even though I was seeing a woman, but I don't know . . . I don't know. It's just confusing and it confuses me that it's, like, him. Especially knowing that he [raped] me, but also

knowing that—we have lots of mutual friends—and he goes around talking about how cool I am to everybody and sees me as unattainable.

Lydia reported that her assailant habitually bragged about their relationship and how unattainable sex with a lesbian woman is for cisgender men. In doing so, he used Lydia's reputation as a desirable and lesbian woman to bolster his own sexual reputation.

Bisexual women were also pursued for their perceived ability to bolster the sexual status of cisgender men, but, unlike lesbian women, their sexualities were viewed as threatening if uncontrolled. Respondents reported that their assailants expressed hostility or disbelief toward their sexualities before initiating sexual contact. In this way, they exerted dominance over bisexual women whose deviant sexualities could be controlled to expand an assailant's sexual portfolio through "kinky" sex. Bisexual women were more likely to report sexual violence that included taboo sexual acts, including anal penetration, bondage, and the use of sex toys.

Cassandra, a Latina 22-year-old pansexual woman, remembered her assailant asking about her sexuality before he repeatedly raped her, using sex toys and bondage in the violence. In response to a question about her assailant's reaction to her queer sexuality, Cassandra said,

He didn't say that he was disgusted, but I got that impression. I'm trying to remember what his actual words were, but he just kept questioning [me] about it. Like-like he even tried to make it sound like he was really okay with it and maybe in the kind of fetishizing sort of way, like he'd probably, you know, be fine watching, but it was something, like, kind of freakish for sure, um, like a novelty.

Cassandra explained that her assailant initially had a negative reaction to her disclosure of her pansexuality, but he ultimately accepted her sexuality on the condition that he could be included and use her sexual experiences with women for his own sexual "novelty." In the rapes that followed this conversation, Cassandra's assailant used extreme levels of violence and domination to exploit her "kinky" sexuality.

Zoe, a White 25-year-old bisexual woman, experienced a mix of hostility and sexual advances regularly when disclosing her sexual identity to men. To demonstrate its normalcy in her life, she recounted a nonconsensual experience from the weekend immediately before our interview. After mentioning her bisexuality to a new acquaintance at a party, she reports that he began to argue with her about her sexual orientation, suddenly leading him to kiss her.

We got onto the topic [of my sexuality] somehow and I said that I was queer and he was like, “So you’re gay,” and I was like, “I’m-I’m bi. I-I like men and women.” And he’s like, “Well, then you’re not queer. You don’t—you’re not queer.” . . . You know, I was drunk, I was activated. Eventually I was like, “You don’t get to tell me how I identify! I’m a fucking queer person! Fuck you!” And I left the house, you know? And then my friends eventually come back, you know, “It’s fine, it’s fine.” And so I came back and he said, “Can I talk to you outside?” And I said okay and I thought he was going to want to talk more about it and he instead he grabbed me and kissed me without even asking. This was last weekend.

In this narrative, Zoe’s assailant attempts to control her sexuality in multiple ways, dismissing and attempting to redefine her queer sexual orientation as heterosexual through verbal and physical means. The use of sexual violence through a nonconsensual kiss was merely an escalation of the assailant’s attempt to dominate Zoe’s sexuality.

In general, the queer women we interviewed recognized heterosexual men’s attempts to control or co-opt their sexualities. In public, they often felt objectified by men appropriating their queer identities for their own pleasure or in the service of bonding with other men through collective masculine domination. The violence they experienced in private spaces struck them as an extension of the same humiliation and subordination they met in public.

Ciera, a White 20-year-old bisexual woman, was sexually assaulted at a queer night club. Her assailant was part of a gaggle of other seemingly cis-gender heterosexual men who laughed as he groped her amid her protests. As she reflected on that experience, she cried and said,

I’ve had really bad experiences with old men—old straight men—at that club that weren’t, like, assault, but they were bad, creepy experiences of staring [at me] or trying to dance [with me] or trying to touch [me] and like I just hate feeling like my sexual identity is for other men’s entertainment. I’m a queer woman at this queer club and these straight men just get to watch and enjoy and make me feel like shit. They get to literally assault me because I’m exotic and queer and that hurts a lot.

Ciera believed her assailant specifically chose to attend a queer club with his friends as they collectively harassed and assaulted the women present, often as they were dancing with or intimately touching other women. Instead of her sexuality—and the club dedicated to its celebration—acting as a safeguard against heterosexual men’s unwanted advances, it seemed to her that many men viewed her queer body and queer spaces as an invitation to dominate.

Queer Assailants

Among gender-nonconforming and cisgender women assailants, the logics of perpetration invoked were astonishingly similar to those of heterosexual cisgender men. Regardless of an assailant's gender identity, themes of masculinity and domination persisted, although they took what we call a "righteous" form related to defending their own sexual or gender identities.

Some respondents spoke bluntly about the similarities between their queer perpetrators and their previous interactions with cisgender heterosexual men. Hazel, a White 24-year-old queer woman, had been sexually assaulted by both a cisgender heterosexual man and two gender-nonconforming individuals. When asked to compare her experiences, she said simply, "It was the same shit." She explained that even if her gender-nonconforming assailants did not have a masculine physical presentation, they "definitely presented masculine more in their personality, being like loud and assertive and being violent." The only difference she recognized was that their aggressive masculine behaviors were not viewed as problematic.

Their anger and violence, they deemed [it] righteous because of the bad things that had happened to them [because of their marginalized identities]. They were allowed to be angry. They were allowed to be pissed off and they were allowed to be violent and they were even allowed to engage in physical violence if they deemed it righteous.

"Righteous" enactments of violence and masculinity were cast as appropriate by assailants who had experienced harassment for their marginalized gender or sexual identities. They used sexual violence as a way to feel in control of their identities and assert a masculinity that had been criticized or dismissed. Assailants with marginalized gender or sexual identities perpetrated sexual violence in a traditionally masculine way, but insisted that their invocation of a traditional masculinity was subversive or "righteous" because they were not cisgender heterosexual men and historically would not be conferred privilege or power through performing traditional masculinity. To put it another way, they used their subordinated identities to justify the violence they committed. This was the primary difference in the way cisgender and queer assailants invoked masculinity—cisgender assailants' membership in the dominant gender group did not permit them to justify their violence through their own experiences of oppression. In deeming their violent masculinity righteous, queer assailants invoked a hybrid masculinity, but one that relied on misogynist and homophobic domination similar to that used by cisgender

heterosexual men and that further marginalized their victims, women, and the queer community more broadly.

Ashley, an Asian 24-year-old pansexual woman, was raped by someone who identified as a cisgender woman at the time, but came out as a trans man the day after the sexual assault. Ashley's assailant focused on sexual acts that are typically associated with masculinity, such as manipulating a woman's body through force and penetrating a woman vaginally. Even though none of our prepared questions were about masculinity, Ashley brought up her assailant's masculine and domineering demeanor often throughout her interview. Ashley got the impression that her assailant's desire for feelings of authentic and socially legitimized masculinity was the central motive of the sexual assault. She recalled,

Ashley: I definitely think her gender identity played a role because I think she just started [her transition] and I remember her saying [things] while she was penetrating me . . . like she really wanted me to validate that they are a man and that they're, like, really masculine . . . that [my assailant] could pass as a man.

Researcher: And so that included things like being very masculine and domineering sexually?

Ashley: Yeah. And I think that the penetration part of it especially. 'Cause she kept saying like that she wished that she had brought a dildo with her or that she wished that she had had her own penis to do certain things to me.

In her description of the assault, the phrase Ashley remembered most vividly was her assailant asking her repeatedly, "Am I man enough for you?" In doing so, Ashley's assailant specifically tied the sexual assault to the masculinity they were not conferred through their current gender identity—that of a closeted trans man still treated as a cisgender woman by others. Ashley's assailant later publicly admitted that they had raped Ashley, but rationalized the act as part of the hardships of coming out as transgender. In doing this, Ashley's assailant did not mean that they committed a sexual assault because they are transgender, but rather that the sexual assault they committed should be excusable—and perhaps even righteous—because of the hardships of their denied gender identity.

Victoria, a White 25-year-old bisexual woman, was physically, emotionally, and sexually abused by her long-term partner who, over the course of their relationship, adopted multiple different gender identities, including (in order) that of a cisgender man, a genderqueer person, and a trans woman. Victoria reported that her assailant invoked a conventionally masculine

sexual role as a way to control her, even as their own gender identity became more feminine. Her assailant asked to introduce violence and power play into their relationship through BDSM, but disregarded the boundaries Victoria had set for the submissive role they ascribed to her. She described the first instance of sexual violence in the relationship:

He started to get really aggressive and really angry and started to, like, make strange comments that hadn't come up before. He started saying things like, you know, "When you get hurt that just makes me want you even more," and so he got really, really aggressive with me. I asked him to leave and he did for maybe a half an hour and he came back and tried to apologize [but he wasn't respecting my boundaries]. When I was not very happy with him still being there, he kind of muscled me into my room, kind of wanted to really be in charge of that situation and then he locked the door and pushed me onto the bed and then he raped me . . . Afterward, he said, "Well, y-you know that I can't get off if it doesn't hurt you."

To Victoria, her assailant maintained the control over her traditionally permitted through masculinity, regardless of their fluctuating gender identity. By choosing BDSM as the avenue through which to do so, their sexual interactions became stigmatized and marginalized, allowing the assailant's violence to become righteous, obscuring the traditionally masculine and violent role her assailant had taken, and making it difficult for Victoria to address the violence that occurred.

Both Ashley's and Victoria's assailants used their victims' sexual orientations to rationalize their violence. Ashley recalled that her assailant explicitly invoked her pansexuality when attempting to coerce her into sex, calling into question the authenticity of her inclusive sexual orientation for rejecting the advances of a gender-nonconforming person. Victoria explained that her assailant blamed the abuse in their relationship on her confident bisexuality, which they contrasted with their own gender and sexual uncertainty. As she recounted,

He had explained it once as being very difficult for me to be able to [be openly bisexual] and be accepted when he was so confused and conflicted and that it just wasn't fair that I literally got the best of both worlds because I had a body I identified with and I also—because of my sexual orientation. I had access, in his mind, to all different kinds of bodies and not just one type of body and that was really, I guess, difficult for him, not knowing if he was transgender, if he was gay, if he was bi, if he was straight and what that looks like. So I think it really did play a role. I don't know how-how actually it motivated him or if he was just using it as an excuse, but he would bring it up

and mention it and say things and use it against me, so I think it played a really complicated role in the situation.

Just as with heterosexual cisgender men, gender-nonconforming assailants indicated to their victims that they found queer women's sexualities to be potentially validating or threatening to their own gender and sexual identities. Dominating the queer bodies they faced through sexual violence was a way to control the impact of queer sexuality on their own conceptions of self.

In this study, when cisgender women act as perpetrators of sexual violence targeting queer women, the tie to masculinity is simpler: They do so with the validation or coaxing of a masculine-identified person. There were only two cases in our sample in which an assailant was a feminine cisgender woman and, in both cases, the assailant was described as one member of a pair of predators. The second member of each pair had a masculine gender presentation. Even though Nessa, a biracial 27-year-old queer woman, was only physically touched by a single cisgender woman during her sexual assault, she described her assailant as

It was this pair . . . And they were just known to just be like out there partiers. Like the kind of queer that slept with whoever and whatever kinda thing. I don't know. They were very intimidating.

Nessa considered her assault to have two assailants—a feminine cisgender woman and her more masculine-identified friend who urged her to be sexually aggressive. Throughout our interview, Nessa only referred to her “femme” assailant in reference to her more “tomboyish” friend who she believed was “bringing [her] out of the closet” and teaching her “predatory” tactics to pursue and control sexual interactions with women, such as plying first-year students with alcohol or drugs and touching women's genitals while dancing without consent. Nessa did not consider her assailant to be particularly dangerous on her own, but believed “the two of them combined is just like a tornado.” As with other queer perpetrators, Nessa recounted that her assailant(s) took a righteous stance about their habitual sexual violence, connecting it to “confidence in their queerness,” which Nessa noted included the more masculine gender presentation of the “tomboyish” one and the use of predatory tactics to achieve sexual access to desirable women.

As with heterosexual cisgender men as perpetrators, queer women assaulted by queer assailants recognized their bodies as spaces commonly used to assert dominance through violence. Heather, a White 28-year-old woman, was raped by a trans man who she believed drew upon stereotypes about queer women to avoid accountability for their actions. She explained,

We're like so fucking vulnerable, especially queer femmes who are people of color, who are transgender women, who are poor and disabled and crazy, and those of us who are like really marginalized. And of course there's all these myths about queer women that perpetuate rape culture too—like we're sluttier and more sexual, that we're more sexualized, that we just need a real man and all those things that all of us have heard that feed into this culture of sexual violence and queerphobia. And I think that people like my rapist depend on these beliefs to protect them.

The violence perpetrated by queer assailants invoked themes of dominating masculinity and drew upon societal norms of queer women's bodies as sexualized objects in ways similar to cisgender heterosexual men; however, they did so in the service of crafting a righteous, hybrid masculine and queer identity.

The effect of the queer assailants' use of masculinity during the sexual violence that occurred was clear: regardless of the gender identity of their assailant(s), it led the respondents in this study to fear masculine-identified people. Ashley, for example, described her experience of "pulling away" from masculinity after she was raped by someone beginning a transition:

Part of the reason why [my assault] felt so betraying is that I felt really safe with women—at the time she identified as a woman or appeared to me as a woman—and after the sexual assault, I felt myself really pulling away from masculine women and from masculine trans people and trans men and also men—just masculinity in general.

Despite believing her assailant to be a woman at the time of her rape, Ashley recognized the role masculinity played in her assault immediately and it guided her behavior around other men and masculine-identified people. It was, to her, the single-most important factor in the violence that occurred. Ashley was far from alone. More than half of the women we interviewed expressed fear or anxiety around masculine people following the violence they endured.

Discussion

This study explores the sources of sexual violence perpetrated against queer women by focusing on victims' narratives of their assailant's declared reasons for perpetrating the violence that occurred. Despite a commonly held presumption that perpetrators of this population of victims would include many—if not mostly—women engaging in different tactics to abuse their victims for different reasons, we find that not to be the case. As in other

populations, the vast majority of perpetrators were cisgender men. Regardless of the gender identity of an assailant, masculinity factored prominently into each of the sexual assaults examined in this study. Furthermore, the masculinity reportedly invoked by the assailants was predicated upon the victim's perceived sexual identity. Although the "rewards" for engaging in sexual violence were not different than those expressed by assailants who did not select their victims based on sexual orientation (Scully & Marolla, 1985), they mapped onto the stereotypes associated with lesbian and bisexual women's sexual identities—and the violence permissible for queer bodies to experience (Chmielewski, 2017; Johnson & Grove, 2017; Meyer, 2012; Ochs, 2011). In some cases, this violence was viewed as "righteous," particularly when the perpetrators belonged to a subordinate masculinity, such as a newly articulated transgender or masculine lesbian identity. Righteous violence did not actively free the queer community from oppression, but instead reinforced homophobic notions about queer femininities through drawing upon the same logics common to dominant masculinities in rationalizing harm toward queer individuals.

These findings emphasize the importance of centering masculinity in the study of sexual violence at all times. As argued in the feminist tradition (Brownmiller, 1975; New York Radical Feminists, 1974), sexual violence cannot be separated from the desire to dominate and we argue that the desire to dominate through sexual violence cannot be separated from masculinity. To put it another way, while all masculinity does not require perpetrating sexual violence, all sexual violence must be understood in the context of masculinity. This is what makes gender-based violence distinct from other violent crimes. Accordingly, academic, activist, and practitioner work would benefit from more direct engagement with masculinity as a direct driver of sexual violence perpetration, even in queer communities. While queer-inclusive anti-violence work often obscures the gender identity of an assailant or flips traditionally gendered narratives of sexual assault to indicate that women can engage in sexually predatory behavior (Turchik et al., 2015), a more accurate queer-inclusive curriculum would engage with violent ideologies of masculinity that extend beyond biological sex. This study adds to a body of literature demonstrating that masculinity—and the violence associated with it—are not exclusively or primarily effects of biological sex or physiology, but rather a social practice that can be enacted (albeit, with varying levels of success) beyond and outside of the gender binary.

We anticipate that the findings from this study could be of particular importance to transgender communities. Transgender individuals are often stereotyped as inherently violent—and, in particular, sexually violent. We do not contest that there is sexual violence perpetrated by transgender

people—although there is no evidence that sexual predation is more common in transgender communities than cisgender communities—but the current study provides empirical evidence that the source of this kind of violence is not a queer or transgender identity itself, but rather adherence to the same type of violent masculinity that is common to sexually violent cisgender men. Our study provides no support for stereotypes that transgender people are prone to sexual violence. It does emphasize the importance of encouraging healthy and non-oppressive enactments of masculinity across all gender identities and actively combating harmful stereotypes about the queer community more broadly.

Although we develop the concept of righteous masculinity in the context of queer-perpetrated sexual assaults, the concept has the potential to be appropriately applied in many other contexts. Righteous masculinity refers only to a traditional or oppressive expression of masculinity enacted by someone of subordinate status. In doing so, the acts are recognized by the actor as righteous, even if they are, in fact, reinforcing inequality and oppression. We hope that future research will examine other marginalized communities affected by righteous masculinity and other forms of its invocation.

It cannot be overlooked that the victims in this study are queer women. In a society rife with homophobia and sexism, our study demonstrates how sexualized stereotypes about queer women designate them as the appropriate objects for performances of masculinity based on violence—even within the queer community itself. To address the violence described in this study, anti-violence advocates must address homophobia and oppressive ideologies of appropriate sexuality, which made the queer victims in this study targets for sexual predation.

There are limitations to our approach. Most obviously, our study focuses on queer sexual victimization among college students. More research is needed on sexual predation toward queer women who are not of college age or who lack the privilege to pursue a higher education. In addition, we rely entirely on victims' narratives to understand the motivations of perpetrators of sexual violence. While our analyses closely mirror the work of other scholars who worked directly with perpetrators (Scully & Marolla, 1985), future scholarship should explore the motivations of perpetrators targeting sexual minority victims more directly and in greater depth. We also recommend more study of assailants who are not cisgender heterosexual men to better hone scholarly understanding of the role of masculinity in the perpetration of sexual violence, particularly among assailants who identify as women at the time of a sexual assault. We recognize that our study relies heavily on narratives of rape and recommend future researchers focus on other types of sexual assault, which might reveal more complicated or nuanced motives among

its perpetrators. We anticipate that research on intimate partner violence within queer couples will be particularly theoretically instructive. Finally, we strongly encourage future studies on the effect of sexual violence on queer victims who were targeted *because* of their sexual orientation. In our view, this type of sexual assault is not only gender-based violence but a form of discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and likely has consequences that cannot be fully understood without explicit intersectional analysis.

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ORCID iD

Nicole Bedera  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0411-8586>

Notes

1. This respondent also identifies with the term “woman” and expressed her comfort with aggregating our data as a study on “women.”
2. We refer to the respondents collectively as queer women as the vast majority of respondents referred to themselves as queer during their interviews, while many took issue with terms such as lesbian and bisexual.
3. These respondents chose to focus on the instances of sexual assault that affected them the most, wanting to reserve their time and emotional energy for the most harmful instances of sexual violence.

4. For intimate partner violence survivors, it was difficult to remember every individual act of sexual violence they experienced in their relationships and they often spoke generally about the types of violence they endured. We counted their relationships as a whole as a single act of sexual assault, leading us to count 67 instances of sexual assault in this dataset, but we are certain this is an underrepresentation.
5. Respondents whose assailants had transitioned after their sexual assaults expressed anxiety around the correct pronouns to use for their assailants. Most opted to use the pronouns their assailants used at the time of the assaults as they did not know the pronouns their assailants currently used, but all expressed anxiety about misgendering their assailants and many used a mixed of pronouns to attempt to respect their assailants' changes in gender identity.

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Author Biographies

Nicole Bedera is a doctoral candidate of sociology at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. Her research focuses on sexual violence and masculinity, particularly at the structural level and in educational settings. Previously, she worked as a victim advocate and retains an interest in working with practitioners to create interventions to prevent and respond to sexual violence.

Kristjane Nordmeyer is a professor of sociology at Westminster College. Her teaching and scholarship focus on gender, sexuality, research methods, cats, and Scandinavia. She has published on intimate partner violence and the application of feminist pedagogies to study abroad experiences. Her current scholarly work focuses on queer women's experiences with sexual assault in college.