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From DARVO to Distress: College Women's Contact with their Perpetrators after Sexual Assault

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ABSTRACT

College women face high rates of sexual violence and rarely report their experiences to school officials. When victims do report, their cases infrequently result in their perpetrators' expulsion. As such, many victims continue to attend school with their perpetrators. We are not aware of any academic research that has explored the experiences of these college women. Furthermore, previous research on how perpetrators behave after acts of violence suggests that individuals who commit sexual assault may try to influence their victims after the assault by denying the assault, attacking the victim verbally, and reversing the victim and offender roles (a pattern referred to by the acronym DARVO). This study explores the experiences of 89 women who were sexually assaulted during college, asking to what extent they experience continued exposure to their perpetrators, whether such contact includes patterns characteristic of DARVO, and how they perceive such contact. Most participants experienced some contact with their perpetrator after their assault, and nearly half indicated experiencing DARVO tactics from their perpetrator. Approximately half of those who experienced contact saw it as having a negative effect on their wellbeing. We also explored participants' written descriptions via directed content analysis, which underscored the quantitative trends. Victims' experiences of contact with their perpetrators warrant further exploration, particularly in contexts where contact may be inevitable.

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Several decades of research document that at least 20% of women experience unwanted sexual contact while attending university (i.e., sexual assault; Koss et al., 1987; Smith & Freyd, 2013). Very few (about 4%) of these victims report their experiences to campus authorities (Fisher et al., 2003). Victims choose to stay silent for various reasons – for example, because they do not trust their university to handle the incident appropriately (Smith & Freyd, 2013), because they do not self-identify their experience as an assault (Krebs et al., 2011), or because they do not believe their experience was serious enough to warrant reporting (Fisher et al., 2003). The consequence of this trend is that most

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college sexual assault victims are not "counted" by their university in official campus crime statistics and may never receive formal support. Moreover, even when victims report, most cases do not result in perpetrators' expulsion (Richards, 2019; Richards et al., 2021). Yet no previously published research explores the experiences of women navigating college while sharing a space with someone who harmed them. This research is a preliminary step in examining their experiences.

Ongoing contact with perpetrators

Most college sexual assault victims are acquainted with the person who perpetrated their assault (Cleere & Lynn, 2013; Gross et al., 2006; Orchowski et al., 2013). Moreover, most perpetrators are not only known to the student but are fellow students at the same university (Freyd, 2021). Victims who are assaulted by fellow students face unique stressors. Some elect to stay silent and remain in an environment where they may see their perpetrator at any time. Some choose to report their experience to the school. Richards (2019) conducted an examination of instances of sexual misconduct reported to Title IX coordinators in 2015 at higher education institutes in a mid-Atlantic state. Of 1,054 total cases received by Title IX coordinators, most (nearly 76%) did not result in a formal adjudication process. Of the limited number of cases that did result in a formal complaint and adjudication, slightly fewer than half resulted in a finding of responsibility, and among those found responsible, just 18% were expelled. As such, the result is that across 1,000 reported cases (which of course nowhere near estimates the likely total number of instances of sexual assault that occurred), only 2% of students accused of sexual misconduct were expelled. Consistent with these findings, Richards et al. (2021) recently examined sexual misconduct reports to Title IX coordinators in 2018 at higher education institutes in New York state. Across 3,829 reported instances of sexual misconduct from over 200 schools, 18% were formally processed to the point of reaching a final finding. Nearly 60% of final findings attributed responsibility to the accused student, and consistent with Richards (2019), almost 19% were expelled. Of all students accused of sexual misconduct, just 2% were ultimately expelled. Without declaring whether this outcome is just or acceptable, this recent research demonstrates the practical reality that most survivors of campus sexual violence continue to attend school with their perpetrators.

Though some universities are large enough to afford relative distance from perpetrators, small schools may hinder victims from dodging around campus to circumvent a perpetrator. Moreover, the reality that most victims know their perpetrators (Cleere & Lynn, 2013) suggests a shared social circle (e.g., academic major, Greek system, clubs or sports). Victims may be unable to fully avoid their perpetrators. And importantly, even if they are successful in

avoidance strategies, constant vigilance to prevent contact may penalize their mental health and academic success. Ongoing possible or actual exposure to a perpetrator may distress victims, though no currently available research addresses this topic. Even if the perpetrator and victim never speak again, even passing contact may cause harm.

DARVO

However, not all perpetrators stay silent. Freyd (1997) theorizes that many perpetrators use a strategy to deter victims from speaking up: deny or minimize the abuse, attack the victim's credibility, and assume a victimized role. The acronym DARVO encapsulates this pattern: Deny, Attack, Reverse Victim and Offender. Recent research suggests that DARVO is indeed a strategy used by wrongdoers during confrontations and that hearing more DARVO correlates with higher self-blame (Harsey et al., 2017). Harsey et al. (2017) sheds light on the topic of what perpetrators say to their victims during confrontations. However, participants in Harsey and colleagues' sample were not all survivors of sexual violence, and most confrontations were about social transgressions rather than abuse. Perpetrators of interpersonal violence may use DARVO differently than people defending themselves against generic wrongdoing. Additionally, Harsey and Freyd (2020) further explored the concept of DARVO via a vignette study in which participants were exposed to an intimate partner violence scenario that differed in terms of the perpetrator's use of DARVO tactics. Participants exposed to a vignette where the perpetrator used DARVO tactics held the victim more responsible, saw the victim as more abusive, held the perpetrator less responsible, and saw the perpetrator as less abusive than participants exposed to a vignette where the perpetrator did not use DARVO. This research illustrates that DARVO does not only operate on victims' understandings of their experience, but also on the perspective of "observers" (i.e., research participants). When perpetrators deny their behavior, attack the victim's credibility, or reverse the roles of victim and offender to friends, family, or others, they may have the power to tangibly influence their listeners' attitude about what happened. However, both Harsey et al. (2017) and Harsey and Freyd (2020) sample from a general college student population rather than pre-screening for victimized participants and focusing on those participants' experience of DARVO. Additional research should examine the extent to which victims of sexual violence experience DARVO from their perpetrators and the impact of such exposure.

Prior research on victim and perpetrator contact

The specific experience of college sexual assault survivors co-existing with perpetrators is vastly understudied. However, such contact in other contexts has been studied to a limited extent. Cameron (1994) offers an early example of such work, characterizing the experiences of sexual abuse survivors who confronted their perpetrators, the majority of whom received DARVO-like tactics during the confrontation. More recently, Shepp et al. (2020) provide a qualitative exploration of assault survivors and their support providers (i.e., confidants to whom they had disclosed their assault experience), highlighting survivors' perceptions – positive, negative, and mixed – of the contact. O'Callaghan et al.'s (2020) qualitative exploration of sexual assault survivors who disclosed their experience at the workplace also includes two participants whose perpetrators were also coworkers, creating an inherent shared environment. Although those participants note the challenges of attending a workplace with a perpetrator, the impact of such a shared environment is not the focus of the study. Prior research also articulates victims' experience of apologies from perpetrators, though this research focuses on apologies that occurred in the context of mediation or restorative justice rather than organically given apologies (i.e., Van Camp, 2017). Though helpful in conceptualizing the potential impact of contact with perpetrators on survivors, the available prior research does not focus specifically on college campuses, which have unique characteristics (i.e., sexual assault rates are high, most perpetrators are fellow students, and physically avoiding a perpetrator is not always possible).

Current study

Research questions

As outlined above, many victims of sexual violence on college campuses likely experience ongoing contact with their perpetrator. However, no research documents this exposure in terms of extent or content. Similarly, empathy and logic suggest that victims may not see contact with their perpetrators as positive, but no research offers insight into their perceptions of such contact. In response to these gaps, this study asks the following questions:

(1) To what extent do college sexual assault victims face continued exposure to their perpetrators after their sexual assault experience?
(2) If victims face continued exposure to perpetrators, does such contact include patterns characteristic of DARVO?
(3) What do victims think and feel about their contact with perpetrators?

Method

Participants

Participants in this study were drawn from our university's Human Subjects Pool, which offers students in introductory psychology and linguistics courses class credit in exchange for participating in research studies. Participants in this study were pre-screened for female gender and affirmative answers to the question: "While attending [this university], have you experienced any unwanted sexual contact (e.g., touching, kissing, penetration)?" Students who pre-screened as eligible for this study were presented with the option to sign up for it without first seeing the topic of the study. Hence, participants cannot self-select into the study based on interest in the topic. One hundred and twenty-one participants completed the survey. Of those who participated, 113 failed no more than one attention check item. Of those, 24 participants did not indicate any sexual assault experiences when completing the survey (despite responding affirmatively to the pre-screening item). As such, these participants were excluded from analyses, leaving a final sample of 89. The final 89 participants had failed no more than one attention check, and all indicated at least one experience of sexual assault.

All participants selected the gender identifier "woman." Seventy one percent of participants identified as White or Caucasian, 12.4% identified as Asian or Asian American, 14.6% identified as Hispanic or Latina/o, 2.2% identified as Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, 1.1% identified as Black or African American, and 3.4% identified as another race not listed. Participants were able to select multiple racial identities. Eighty-nine percent of participants identified as heterosexual or straight, 7.9% identified as bisexual, 1.1% identified as lesbian, 1.1% identified as asexual, and 1.1% identified as queer. Thirty-four percent of participants were in their first year of college, 31.5% were in their second year, 15.7% were in their third year, 18% were in their fourth year, and 1.1% were in their fifth year or further. Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 32 (M = 19.62, SD = 1.82).

Materials

This study was part of a larger dissertation which included numerous questionnaires and scales. Only the materials relevant to the current report are described below.

College sexual assault

Sexual assault since college enrollment was measured using the Sexual Experiences Survey (SES; adapted from Koss et al., 2007). The SES assesses for type of sexual contact (i.e., fondling, oral, vaginal, etc.) and strategy

used by the perpetrator (i.e., physical force, intimidation, incapacitation due to alcohol, etc.). Scale reliability was good for this sample (Cronbach's $\alpha = .81$).

Participants were also asked to identify their relationship to the person who did this to them (response options: *Stranger, Acquaintance, Friend, Romantic Partner, Former Romantic Partner, Relative/Family Member, Teacher/Coach/Instructor/Supervisor*, and *Other*) and the person's status at the university (options: *Undergraduate student, Graduate student, Staff, Faculty, Not affiliated with the university*, and *I don't know*).

Perpetrator contact

Participants were asked whether the person who perpetrated the experience had tried to contact them in any way (i.e., text, e-mail, in-person; response options were *Yes* and *No*). Participants were able to select any ways the perpetrator had tried to contact them (e.g., a message on a social media site, text message, Snapchat, etc.). They were also asked whether the perpetrator tried to get in touch with anyone close to them (response options: *Yes* and *No*) and whether they (the participant) had contacted or tried to contact the perpetrator in any way (response options: *Yes* and *No*). In addition to intentional contact, participants were also asked how many times they had run into the perpetrator on or off campus (response options ranging from 0 to 10 or more).

Participants who indicated either that they had contacted their perpetrator or their perpetrator had contacted them were asked how the contact had affected them (response options: *Very Negatively, Negatively, Neither Negatively nor Positively, Positively*, and *Very Positively*).

DARVO

Participants who indicated that they had either been in touch with their perpetrator or their perpetrator had been in touch with them were presented with the DARVO questionnaire (Harsey et al., 2017). Participants were prompted with the following: "You indicated that you have had some form of contact with the person or persons who did this to you after what happened. Did he/she/they say anything like any of the following items to you? Select all that apply." The DARVO questionnaire is a 72-item inventory that allows participants to select types of statements their perpetrator made to them (for example: "I am not responsible for what happened" or "You're making it up for attention"). The DARVO questionnaire assesses for denials, attacks, reversals of the victim and offender roles, and apologies (i.e., "I realize what I did was wrong"). Participants' checked responses were summed to create four sub-scales: denials, attacks, reversals of victim and offender, and apologies. Scale ranges, means, standard deviations, and reliabilities are available in Table 1.

Table 1. DARVO scale ranges, means, and scale reliabilities.

	Theoretical Range	Actual Range	Mean (SD)	Cronbach's Alpha
Deny	0–18	0–16	2.25(3.83)	.92
Attack	0–18	0–16	1.15(2.99)	.93
Reverse	0–18	0–14	.75(2.09)	.89
Apologies	0–18	0–17	1.10(2.82	.92

Free responses

Participants were given space to describe the impact that contact with perpetrators may have had on them ("Please briefly describe the effect of having contact with the person or persons. How has having contact with him/her/them impacted you?" Seventy-two participants provided a response. Seven participants used this space to clarify that they had not had any contact with the perpetrator since their assault. The remaining 65 were considered using directed content analysis.

Procedure

Our University's Office of Research Compliance approved all procedures in this study. Participants were recruited via the online scheduling system SONA. Students in introductory psychology and linguistics courses at this university have the opportunity to participate in research studies for class credit. Participants can take a pre-screening measure to determine whether they are eligible for a variety of research studies. For the current study, participants who reported in their pre-screen that they identified as women and had experienced unwanted sexual contact since their enrollment were eligible to participate. Participants were not made aware of why they were eligible for this study. After signing up for the study, participants were provided with a link to the Qualtrics portal and could complete the survey at their convenience. Upon entering the survey, participants completed an online consent form and responded to the survey items. Attention check items were embedded throughout the survey (in line with Oppenheimer et al., 2009) to identify careless responding. After failing one attention check, participants were provided with a prompt letting them know that they had failed an attention check on the prior page. They were reminded to provide careful answers to all questions. Participants who failed a second attention check were excluded from analyses.

After completing the survey, all participants were presented with a debriefing form. Participants were informed that the purpose of the study was to better understand how women's experiences of sexual violence during college impact academic, emotional, and physical health.

They were offered a variety of local resources (i.e., counseling services, hotlines) and provided with the researchers' contact information should they have any questions.

Content analysis strategy

A directed content analysis approach was utilized to code participants' responses to the open-ended question regarding the impact of contact with perpetrators (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). By using a directed approach, we started with the theory of DARVO which predicts that perpetrators will engage in predictable patterns when communicating with their victims (Freyd, 1997; Harsey et al., 2017). Our preliminary codebook included denials, attacks, reversals of victim and offender, and apologies, in line with the DARVO questionnaire. Given Harsey et al.'s (2017) findings that receiving DARVO predicted self-blame, we also included self-blame or doubt as an initial code. Additionally, we allowed for the possibility that some contact with perpetrators would be perceived as helpful or healing and included this as a preliminary code. In line with Hsieh and Shannon (2005), the first author of this paper completed an initial read of the responses and highlighted all text that described an encounter with a perpetrator or the impact of such an encounter. She then coded the highlighted text using the preliminary codebook. Additional codes were inductively identified to capture themes within the text not captured by the initial codes, and these were added, creating a final codebook. The second author then read and coded the responses. Discrepancies were discussed until reaching consensus. Coding was completed using Dedoose and Excel software.

Results

Perpetrator characteristics and contact

Seventy-five percent of participants indicated that their perpetrator was a fellow student. Participants' contact with their perpetrators since their assaults are depicted in Figure 1. Participants' reactions to being contacted by a perpetrator are depicted in Figure 2. Forty nine percent of participants indicated that being contacted had a negative or very negative effect on them.

DARVO

Fifty one percent of participants indicated hearing a deny, attack, or reversal of victim and offender from their perpetrator and 25.8% had received an apology. The percentage of participants who reported each type of DARVO plus

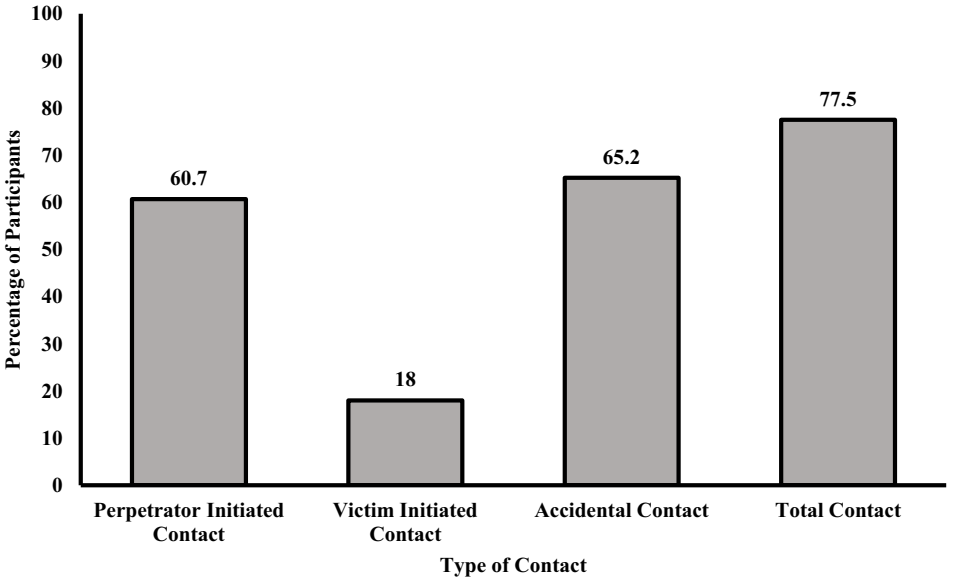

Figure 1. Percentage of participants who indicated contact with their perpetrator by type of contact.

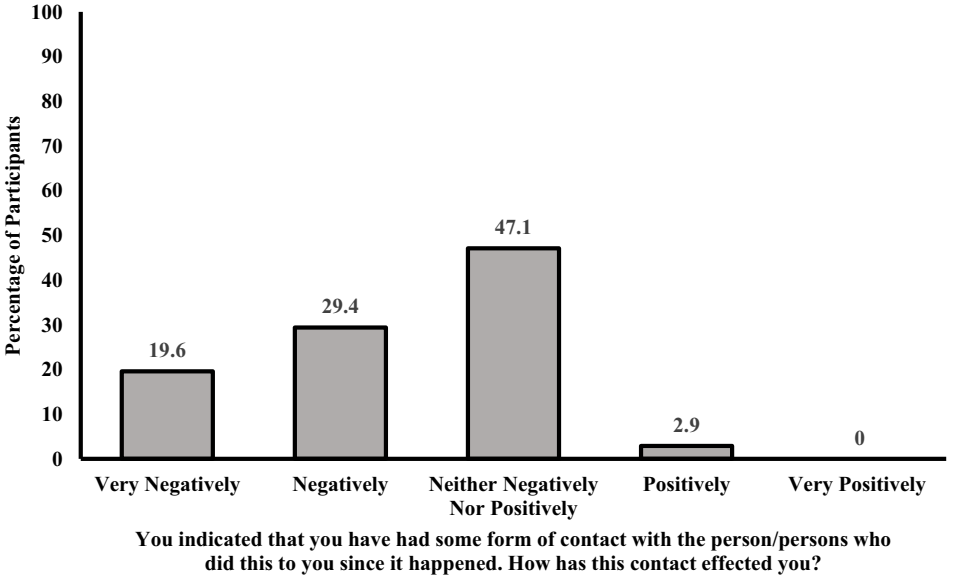

Figure 2. Participants' responses to the question: "You indicated that you have had some form of contact with the person/persons who did this to you since it happened. How has this contact affected you?."

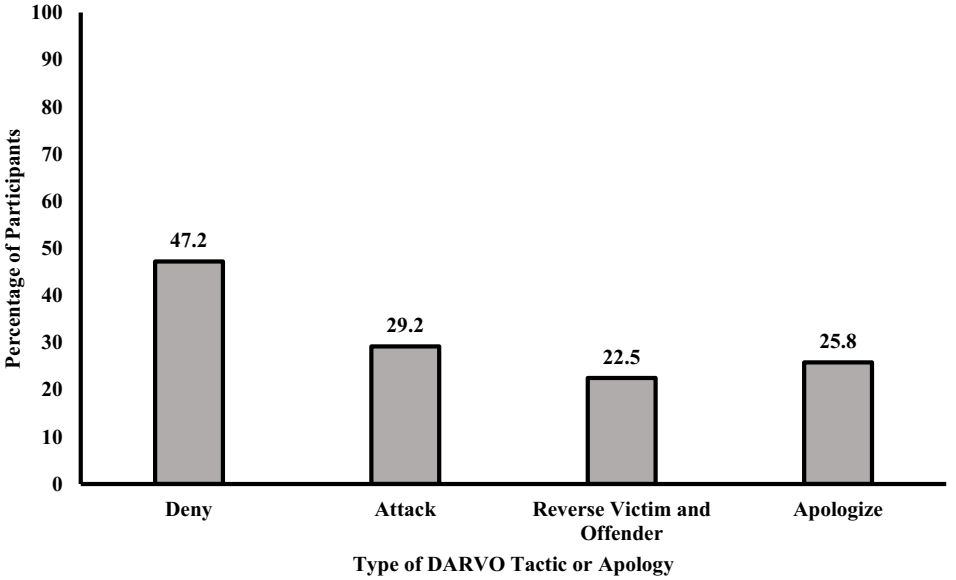

Figure 3. Percentage of participants who reported receiving denials, attacks, reversals of victim and offender, and apologies from their perpetrators.

Table 2. Correlations among DARVO scales and apologies.

	Deny	Attack	Reverse	Apologies
Deny	–			
Attack	.86***	–		
Reverse	.75***	.82***	–	
Apologies	.20	.17	.32**	–

apologies are depicted in Figure 3. Correlations among the DARVO scales plus apologies are depicted in Table 2. Attacks, denials, and reversals were each highly and positively correlated with one another (correlation coefficient ranging from .76 to .85), while apologies were also positively but less strongly correlated with the three DARVO scales (correlation coefficients ranging from .17 to .32) and only reached significance in this study for the reversals scale.

Content analysis themes

The themes that emerged from participants' written responses are summarized below. Direct quotes from participants' written responses are provided to illustrate how their experiences fit within the themes.

DARVO and self-blame

As expected, participants shared experiences that aligned with the construct of DARVO and particularly with denials. Although some participants shared that their perpetrators outright refuted that an assault had occurred, others received more subtle denials. Having the perpetrator act "normal" felt like a denial in and of itself.

> They messaged me the next day asking if I wanted to go out to dinner or something like nothing happened. They never indicated that anything was wrong. It made me feel like what happened was okay when it really wasn't.

Similarly, another participant wrote:

> He talked to a mutual friend about it briefly, but it did not appear that he believed he did anything wrong. It made me feel crazy because I knew what he did was wrong but he didn't think so.

In both these participants' narratives, the impact of relatively minimal contact is notable. One received a message and the other heard the perpetrator's perspective secondhand from a friend, yet both indicate that the contact was dysregulating to their understanding of their experience.

Other participants experienced more extensive contact with more intense DARVO patterns. One participant highlighted her perpetrator's use of reversing the role of victim and offender:

> They alternated between apologizing, and lying to me convincing me he was suicidal and his parents were kicking him out of the house [to] try to keep me from reporting, making me feel guilty in the process. He strongly insinuated [he] was suicidal as a result of what happened and as a result I felt responsible.

Although the perpetrator acknowledges that the assault occurred, he took on the role of victim by implying that he is the one who suffered. Along these lines, another participant shared an experience which matches multiple elements of DARVO:

> I tried to confront the person about it and they denied it and told me I was wrong and I wasn't remembering it right. We tried to remain friends but when I stopped wanting to have sexual contact with him and with other people, even though we were just friends, he became enraged and said very hurtful things about me so I cut off our connection. I lost a friend from what happened but also some self esteem when he questioned my values and worth.

The theme of attack is particularly notable in this quote. Her perpetrator shifts from denying that the event occurred to striking at her credibility and character, highlighting DARVO's utility to destabilize and discredit victims.

An important theme within participants' experiences of DARVO was the way in which hearing denials, attacks, and reversals elicited self-blame and doubt. As highlighted in all the examples above, participants who experienced DARVO

from their perpetrators questioned their own sanity for believing an assault occurred, worried they were the ones to blame, and doubted their sense of self. In line with prior research on DARVO, perpetrators' tactics successfully eroded participants' sense of surety in what happened and themselves. In this sense, participants provided evidence that DARVO "works" to maintain the perpetrator's upper hand.

Apologies

As revealed by the quantitative data, some participants reported receiving apologies from their perpetrators. Some apologies were relatively cleart: "they apologized and now it's better that I can move on knowing that I was right in that the situation was wrong." Although several participants appreciated receiving such apologies, others expressed more mixed feelings:

> I was shocked and surprised he was talking to me even though I see him around often. He was able to apologize and knows that what he did is wrong, but does not understand that I feel afraid when he is around. I know he is angry with what he did and that he regrets it, so I feel like I have forgiven him.

This participant expressed some gains from hearing that the perpetrator realized his mistake and felt remorse. However, she also indicated increased fear provoked by the additional contact with him.

Although most apologies were relatively clear, some contact included conversations that recognized the assault without fully articulating an apology. For example: "our contact afterwards was to acknowledge faults and clear the air, so we are still friends and it doesn't ever come up between us now." Others noted perpetrators who checked in on them after the experience, "They wanted to make sure I was okay because they didn't intentionally do anything." Although in both cases no apology is explicitly included, the victims seem to have a sense of validation or closure. In general, direct apologies and more oblique acknowledgment were relatively well-received by victims, with the exceptions being for the limited participants who reported hearing both DARVO and an apology from their perpetrator.

Distress

As expected, participants described varying degrees of distress in response to contact with their perpetrators. Distressing emotions elicited by contact included anxiety, fear, panic, and sadness. For example, one participant captured a variety of distressing emotions in her response:

> I felt like I couldn't breathe. All the happiness seeped out of me when I heard his voice on the phone. I was depressed. I still am. It breaks me up inside. It makes me want to be numb. It makes me feel disgusting, and knowing he can get over it so easy, knowing it effects [sic] him very little is angering, and it confuses me.

Her words highlight a theme throughout participants' expressions of distress in which contact exacerbated already present trauma symptoms. Along these, lines, some participants shared enhanced hypervigilance: "I see them when I walk to class everyday [sic] and I feel he is following me. I get scared to leave my house because he lives down the street from me somewhere and keeps wanting to talk but I don't want to." Similarly, symptoms in-line with experiencing a flashback or dissociative episode were identified.

> Whenever I see him around campus my whole body freezes up and I cannot concentrate on anything that is happening around me. I also feel very uncomfortable when I see him at the gym or on campus and I am afraid he is going to come up to me and try to talk to me.

The participant's noting of a freeze response while walking around campus particularly highlights the impact of sharing an academic space with a perpetrator. Another participant wrote: "When I see him it makes me go back to that exact moment with those same feeling[s]. I get overwhelmed and start to get anxious and cannot focus." Her description of a flashback underscores how a perpetrator's mere presence can constitute a potent trigger.

Notably, relatively minimal contact (across campus, at the gym) could be very distressing. This trend is bolstered by participants who noted that virtual contact was also upsetting – "seeing their posts on social media was triggering and often gave me anxiety attacks" – illustrating how a shared physical and virtual world poses challenges to recovery.

Discomfort

In addition to more intense reactions such as anxiety, anger, or fear, participants also shared uncomfortable or awkward feelings when they saw their perpetrators in a variety of different settings. Some expressed this discomfort as a relatively minor disturbance: "It was uncomfortable and I wanted to move on." Others shared more severe discomfort such as "I felt a little sick for a while afterwards." Participants' discomfort sometimes echoed posttraumatic symptoms of self-blame or changed perceptions of the self ("it makes me feel uncomfortable and dirty") or emotional numbing and avoidance ("just feels awkward and embarrasing [sic] and leaves me empty for a while").

Positive contact

Not all participants articulated contact as a negative experience. Some explained that the situation was resolved through a conversation, allowing the victim and perpetrator to either resume a prior relationship or coexist on campus in relative peace:

> My experience was different from most I feel. He was understanding in the moment after he pushed himself on me and kissed me when I told him to stop he did. I didn't have any awkward contact with him. Instead I felt okay when seeing him around campus.

Participants' experience of positive contact aligns with quantitative results which highlighted a limited number of participants who saw contact with their perpetrators as positive. Positive contact and DARVO did not overlap in participants' responses, suggesting that perpetrators' response to the assault may impact how victims experience subsequent contact.

Discussion

This study examined female victims' ongoing contact with their perpetrators after experiences of sexual assault during college. Prior to conducting this research, we posed the following three overarching questions:

(1) To what extent do college sexual assault victims face continued exposure to their perpetrators after their sexual assault experience?
(2) If victims face continued exposure to perpetrators, does such contact include patterns characteristic of DARVO?
(3) What do victims think and feel about their contact with perpetrators?

In line with these questions, we recruited a sample of college women who had all experienced sexual violence since enrolling at this university.

Regarding our first research question, this study illustrates that victims of college sexual assault do indeed experience contact with their perpetrators. Seventy eight percent of participants indicated some form of contact with their perpetrator since the assault. Types of contact varied and included social media messages, texts, calls, in-person, and accidental run-ins. The open-ended data corresponds with the quantitative analyses; participants described seeing their perpetrators at the gym, while walking to class, hearing about them through mutual friends, seeing them on social media, and more. The physical realities of sharing a campus community after sexual assault have not been previously documented in research; these findings illuminate the potentially challenging topography faced by students who are assaulted by peers.

In line with our second research question, victims' contact with perpetrators did reflect DARVO tactics. Denials were the most reported element of DARVO. A quarter of the sample received apologies from perpetrators. While the three DARVO scales (attacks, denials, and reversals) were each highly and positively correlated with one another, apologies were positively but less strongly correlated with those three DARVO scales and only reached significance in this study for the reversals scale). This generally coheres with previous research on DARVO suggesting that the three DARVO scales are

highly correlated while exposure to DARVO is not strongly correlated with receiving apologies from perpetrators of social transgressions (Harsey et al., 2017). Similarly, the themes from the open-ended responses align with these findings; most who reported an apology or form of reconciliation characterized it as a helpful or positive experience and did not indicate any DARVO.

In regards to our third research question, we can understand how victims reacted to contact with their perpetrators in two ways. First, participants were asked directly how contact with their perpetrator had impacted them (see, Figure 2). Participants' reactions to contact with perpetrators can be characterized as follows: nearly half of victims felt that contact elicited a negative or very negative impact on them, nearly half of victims felt that contact had a neutral impact on them, and only two victims felt that contact had a positive impact on them. Not all contact is painful or devastating, but a substantial proportion of college sexual violence victims saw contact with their perpetrators as negative. Open-ended responses further underscored this trend. Some participants described neutral or mildly uncomfortable contact, others described highly distressing contact, and a limited number described positive contact, typically accompanied by an apology or acknowledgment of the assault by the perpetrator.

Implications

This study offers insight into the challenges faced by victims of college sexual violence. Violence on campus is often viewed as a single event – the victim experiences an assault and then copes with said assault. However, the current study contradicts such a perspective. Three quarters of victims indicated that at least one of their perpetrators was affiliated with this university. Almost two-thirds of participants had accidentally run into their perpetrator at least once since their assault. Fifty-one percent of participants had experienced DARVO from their perpetrator. For victims of college sexual violence, the experience may not end when the assault itself ends.

Limitations

Given the dearth of previous research examining women's experiences of sharing a campus with perpetrators after college sexual violence, the current study was organized around three questions rather than a set of specific hypotheses. This research is new, and in this sense, exploratory. As such, this report offers an initial examination of several important questions about campus violence but cannot provide definitive answers to those questions; more research is clearly needed. Furthermore, the sample in this study is small; future research with larger and more diverse samples is needed. The population explored is specific to this university's context, as we examined exclusively

women at a predominately White college campus. Samples exploring college men's experiences after sexual violence victimization is needed, as is research about perpetrator contact among more diverse populations and in community settings.

Additionally, data for the current study were collected at one time point only. Participants' assault experiences naturally varied in terms of when they occurred – hence, the latency since each assault differed. Some participants may have been assaulted very recently and others several years ago. Furthermore, some participants reported multiple assault experiences during college while others reported only one. Given the small sample size, considering different outcomes by type and severity of assault was not feasible. However, future research can articulate whether perpetrator contact and DARVO after sexual assault differ by type or severity of the violence.

Generalizability of the results may be limited. All participants were students in introductory psychology and linguistics courses. While many students at this university participate in the Human Subjects pool at some point, there may be some systematic difference between students who participate and those who do not. Additionally, the type of school participants attend undoubtedly also matters in terms of how many students reside on or immediately adjacent to campus and the size of the student body. This study took place at a large, public university where few students live on campus past their first year. Our results may be quite different from those found at other types of schools.

Self-selection is greatly minimized by using the Human Subjects pool. Participants in the Human Subjects Pool are not informed of the topic of the research study they have signed up for before they read the consent form for that study. Hence, participants cannot self-select into the study based on interest in the topic and only become aware of the topic when they reach the consent form. However, since participants were required to respond affirmatively to a pre-screen for college sexual assault, it is possible that participants in this sample were more willing to disclose their experiences of sexual assault than the average victim. It is also possible for participants to cease or disengage from their participation after reading the consent form. In this study, only eight participants were excluded from analyses due to failing attention checks. Participants excluded due to careless responding may differ systematically in some way from the rest. However, given the small number of participants eliminated due to failing attention checks, this is a minimal concern.

Future directions

Future research should explore in-depth how remaining on campus with a perpetrator, and potentially being in contact with that perpetrator, impacts college sexual assault victims' mental, physical, and academic wellbeing. Additionally, the lens on this topic can be expanded to include the ways in

which victims' social networks are impacted by sexual assault (for example, through the loss of friends who take the perpetrator's side or the discomfort of knowing that other students heard gossip about what happened). Ideally, future studies on this topic will recruit larger samples over longer periods of time. By following-up with participants over time, researchers can observe the persistence of trauma symptoms, obtain information about revictimization rates, and gain knowledge about victims' ongoing contact with their perpetrators. Further articulation of the effects of DARVO is also crucial. Given Harsey and Freyd's (2020) findings that merely reading about DARVO use by a perpetrator can cause research participants to blame victims more and perpetrators less, it is possible that perpetrators' use of DARVO may have tangible impacts on victims' perceived credibility by peers or even by campus officials. Education about DARVO has been shown to increase perceptions of victim believability by observers of DARVO use by a perpetrator (Harsey & Freyd, 2020); as such, researchers and schools will benefit from clearly understanding how perpetrators behave after sexual assault. For schools seeking restorative justice solutions to campus sexual violence (i.e., Harper et al., 2017), a thorough understanding of DARVO tactics (and the reality that perpetrators' use of DARVO is not likely to coincide with authentic apology) will be important.

Conclusion

For college women who are victims of sexual violence on campus, their experiences extend beyond the discrete incident of the assault. Most victims report perpetrators who are fellow students, and most victims have had some form of contact with their perpetrator since their assault. Although the specific mental health effects of contact with perpetrators are not clearly illuminated by the current study, few participants experienced such contact as positive and many experienced it as distressing. As universities strive to improve their handling of campus violence, they must consider the ongoing effects of assault on victims' mental, physical, and academic health.

Disclosure statement

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