Understanding Women’s Labeling of Unwanted Sexual Experiences With Dating Partners: A Qualitative Analysis
Melanie S. Harned
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Understanding Women’s Labeling of Unwanted Sexual Experiences With Dating Partners

A Qualitative Analysis

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Qualitative data are used to examine the process by which women come to label their unwanted sexual experiences with dating partners as sexual abuse or assault, as well as the factors that impede such labeling. Issues of consent, causal attributions, and minimization were found to be central to understanding why women did or did not label. Labeling was generally a gradual process and was most often triggered by social support seeking. Women who did not label typically defined the incident as something less serious than sexual abuse or assault, although some provided definitions indicating that they had felt victimized.

Keywords: labeling, sexual abuse, sexual assault

Sexual abuse and assault have been topics of central concern to the women’s movement since its rebirth in the late 1960s. Through a variety of consciousness-raising efforts, feminists have worked to promote awareness of these offenses as serious social problems. A major goal of this movement has been to empower women to

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name their experiences as sexual abuse or assault and, thus, to recognize the seriousness of the offenses committed against them (Kelly, 1988; Warshaw, 1988). Despite decades of speak-outs, educational efforts, and legal reforms, research continues to indicate that few women who are subjected to unwanted sexual experiences label themselves as having been sexually abused, sexually assaulted, or raped (e.g., Botta & Pingree, 1997; Fisher, Cullen, & Turner, 2000; Koss, Gidycz, & Wisniewski, 1987), and women who are victimized by romantic partners are the least likely to label their unwanted sexual experiences (Koss, 1985). The goal of the present study is to use qualitative data to provide insight into the process of coming to label unwanted sexual experiences with a dating partner as sexual abuse or assault, as well as the factors that may impede such labeling.

Since the early 1980s, researchers have worked to provide valid and reliable estimates of the prevalence of sexual victimization in women’s lives. Studies that use behavioral measures of sexual victimization have yielded prevalence estimates of rape among U.S. female undergraduates ranging from 13% to 27%; however, of the women classified as rape victims, only 12% to 57% labeled their experiences as rape (Botta & Pingree, 1997; Frazier & Seales, 1997; Kahn, Jackson, Kully, Badger, & Halvorsen, 2003; Kahn, Mathie, & Torgler, 1994; Koss, 1985; Koss et al., 1987; Layman, Gidycz, & Lynn, 1996; Pitts & Schwartz, 1993; Schwartz & Leggett, 1999). Similar results have been obtained among samples of U.S. community and working women (Koss, Figueredo, Bell, Tharan, & Tromp, 1999; Russell, 1982) and international samples of female undergraduates (Gavey, 1991; Patton & Mannison, 1995). Thus, research has consistently indicated that few women who experience acts that meet behavioral definitions of rape in fact label their experiences as rape.

The existing theoretical and empirical work suggests a variety of factors that may inhibit labeling, including the stereotypes of rape that victims may hold (Kahn et al., 1994); victims’ acceptance of rape myths (Muehlenhard, Powch, Phelps, & Giusti, 1992); the negative social and personal consequences of labeling oneself a victim (Taylor, Wood, & Lichtman, 1983); self-blame (Pitts & Schwartz, 1993); concern for the perpetrator (Parrot, 1991); and denial or minimization (Koss & Cleveland, 1997). In addition, research has found that women are more likely to label unwanted
sexual experiences that involve a high degree of physical force, strangers or nonromantic acquaintances, and physical resistance (Botta & Pingree, 1997; Koss, 1985; Layman et al., 1996; Schwartz & Leggett, 1999).

The present work seeks to expand on the previous research in several ways. First, although some quantitative research exists that has succeeded in identifying variables associated with labeling, detailed descriptive data focusing on the process by which women come to label their unwanted sexual experiences as sexual abuse or assault, and the factors that impede this process, are lacking. Accordingly, the present study employs a phenomenological qualitative research approach that focuses on “understanding the meaning events have for persons being studied” (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994, p. 3). In addition, the present study is guided by feminist standpoint epistemologies that have been broadly described as using women’s lives and experiences to form the basis of knowledge claims (Harding, 1991). These methodological approaches were chosen for their ability to provide a detailed, contextual understanding of the focus of inquiry; that is, to allow insight into women’s reasons for labeling or not labeling their unwanted sexual experiences with dating partners as sexual abuse or assault. Such findings have the potential to inform public policy, program development, and educational efforts related to sexual victimization.

Second, previous research in this area has almost exclusively focused on women’s use of the label rape and has not considered women’s labeling of finer gradations of sexually victimizing experiences. As Koss (1985) suggests, “future studies could explore whether [victims] acknowledged that their experience was at least on a continuum with rape” (p. 196). Similarly, Kelly (1988) stresses the importance of conducting research based on the concept of a continuum of sexual violence, which allows women to discuss a variety of forms of sexual victimization and enables researchers to examine the complexity of how women define their unwanted sexual experiences. Thus, the present work assesses a wider range of sexually victimizing experiences (i.e., not just rape) and, to reflect this continuum approach, asks victims if they consider these experiences to constitute “sexual abuse or assault.”
To these ends, the present study examines four research questions:

1. Why do or do not women label their unwanted sexual experiences as sexual abuse or assault?
2. Is labeling immediate or a gradual process?
3. What events or experiences trigger delayed labeling?
4. How do women who do not label their unwanted sexual experiences as sexual abuse or assault define their experiences?

**METHOD**

**SAMPLE AND PROCEDURE**

The target sample consisted of 3,000 female undergraduates in their sophomore or junior year of study at a large, midwestern public university. To achieve maximum variation within this population, a stratified random sampling procedure was employed and the categories used for stratification included: (a) race (African American, Asian American or Pacific Islander, Hispanic, Native American, Caucasian, foreign, and unknown or other) and (b) class year (sophomore and junior). A letter was sent to all members of the target sample to inform them of their selection and invite them to complete the survey, which was described as a questionnaire about student life. The survey was presented electronically on the Internet because all members of the target sample were known to have access to the Internet through university facilities. Each participant was required to use a unique login to access the survey, thereby precluding anonymity. An informed consent form was included with the original mailing and appeared at the beginning of the online survey. Cash prizes in the amount of $50 were awarded at six preselected intervals (e.g., the 1st and 100th respondents). Two follow-up mailings were conducted (one postcard, one e-mail) and, ultimately, 1,109 women completed the survey, yielding a response rate of 37% after correcting for those participants who had at least one mailing returned as undeliverable. Of these women, 1,092 provided usable data and were included in the sample. A total of 17 respondents were excluded from analyses for the following reasons: (a)
14 self-identified as seniors and their class year was corroborated via a university database, and (b) three left more than 50% of the survey blank. Chi-square analyses conducted to assess sample representativeness indicated that the full sample did not differ significantly from the population in terms of class year ($\chi^2 (1) = 1.45, p > .05$), but did differ in terms of race and ethnicity ($\chi^2 (5) = 22.23, p < .001$). These results suggest that the full sample included proportionally fewer African Americans (sample = 5% vs. population = 8%) and Hispanics (sample = 3% vs. population = 5%) and more Caucasians (sample = 74% vs. population = 72%) than the population from which it was drawn.

Given the purpose of the present study, the sample was narrowed to include only those women ($n = 251$) who reported an unwanted sexual experience with a dating partner on the Sexual Experiences Survey (SES; Koss & Gidycz, 1985) and completed the open-ended qualitative items about a significant experience (see below).\footnote{Dating was defined as having been involved in a dating relationship, including one-time dates or “hook-ups” to long-term dating relationships and included both same- and opposite-sex dating partners. The average age of these women was 19.64 years ($SD = 0.73$), with a range from 18 to 22. The majority ($n = 243; 97\%$) had never been married and were not living with a dating partner; $3\% (n = 8)$ were living with a dating partner. Most ($n = 199; 80\%$) self-identified as European American or White, followed by Asian American ($n = 24; 10\%$), African American ($n = 11; 4\%$), Latina ($n = 8; 3\%$), foreign ($n = 3; 1\%$), bicultural ($n = 2; 1\%$), and other ($n = 2; 1\%$). Forty-one percent ($n = 104$) were sophomores, and $59\% (n = 147)$ were juniors. The majority ($n = 240; 96\%$) self-identified as heterosexual, whereas $1\% (n = 2)$ were lesbians, and $3\% (n = 8)$ were bisexual.}

**MEASURES**

Sexual victimization. The 10-item Sexual Experiences Survey (SES; Koss & Gidycz, 1985) assessed participants’ unwanted sexual experiences with dating partners since they had been students at the university. Four categories of unwanted sexual experiences recommended by the test developers were used: (a) Rape (i.e., unwanted completed vaginal or penile, oral, or anal intercourse or penetration by other objects that was perpetrated using threats
of bodily harm, actual force, or when the victim was impaired by drugs or alcohol), (b) Attempted rape (i.e., unwanted attempted sexual intercourse that was perpetrated using threats of bodily harm, actual force, or when the victim was impaired by drugs or alcohol), (c) Sexual coercion (i.e., unwanted completed sexual intercourse subsequent to the use of overwhelming verbal pressure or misuse of authority), and (d) Sexual contact (i.e., unwanted sexual behavior, including fondling, kissing, or petting but not intercourse that occurred subsequent to overwhelming verbal pressure, misuse of authority, threats of bodily harm, or actual force). It is recognized that not all of the incidents assessed by the SES would qualify as criminal acts (Koss & Gidycz, 1985). Indeed, the SES was used to enable examination of women’s labeling of a broader range of sexually victimizing experiences than are currently included in legal definitions. Responses were provided on a 5-point Likert-type scale from 0 = never to 4 = very frequently. The SES has been found to be reliable (α = .74) and to demonstrate excellent 1-week test-retest reliability (Koss & Gidycz, 1985). A coefficient alpha of .78 was obtained for the SES in the present study.

A Significant Experience. Respondents who endorsed one or more items (i.e., responded greater than never) on the SES were instructed to respond to a variety of questions about “the situation that had the greatest effect” on them (i.e., a Significant Experience). The instructions indicated that the Significant Experience could be a single incident or something that happened across an extended period of time with the same dating partner. These respondents completed a second version of the SES (consisting of the same 10 items as the original SES) that assessed the behaviors that occurred during their Significant Experience. Response options were 0 = did not happen and 1 = happened. In addition, five yes-or-no questions assessed characteristics of the perpetrator, including gender, drinking or using drugs, fraternity member, varsity athlete, and racial or ethnic background. Three items assessed characteristics of the dating relationship, including a casual (defined as “a good time with no future commitment or obligation”) versus serious relationship (defined as “involving a great deal of commitment and intimacy”), length of the relationship (1 = one date, 2 = less than a month, 3 = 1 to 3 months, 4 = 4 to 6
months, 5 = 7 to 12 months, 6 = 1 to 2 years, 7 = more than 2 years), and whether they were still dating the perpetrator (yes or no). Finally, two items assessed characteristics of the situation, including the frequency of the behavior (1 = once, 2 = once a month or less, 3 = twice to four times a month, 4 = every few days, 5 = every day) and whether it was still happening (yes or no).

**Labeling.** Several quantitative and open-ended qualitative items assessed labeling of the Significant Experience. All respondents completed a single yes or no item asking, “Do you consider this situation to have been sexual abuse or assault?” Participants who responded yes (i.e., labelers) were asked to complete three additional questions. The first, a qualitative item, asked labelers to “describe why you do consider this situation to have been sexual abuse or assault.” The second, a quantitative item, asked labelers, “When did you first consider this situation to have been sexual abuse or assault?” and response options ranged from 1 = immediately to 6 = more than a year after it happened. Those respondents who indicated that they had not labeled their experience immediately completed an additional qualitative item asking if there was “a specific event or experience that eventually caused you to consider this situation to have been sexual abuse or assault?”

Participants who responded no to the initial labeling item (i.e., nonlabelers) completed two additional qualitative items. The first item asked nonlabelers to “describe why you do not consider this situation to have been sexual abuse or assault.” The second item asked nonlabelers to provide their own label for the situation. Specifically, the item asked, “How do you define this situation? For example, is there another term (besides ‘sexual abuse or assault’) that you would use to define this situation?”

**QUALITATIVE DATA ANALYSIS**

Respondents’ open-ended answers to each of the four qualitative items were analyzed by the author using Maykut and Morehouse’s (1994) interpretative-descriptive approach. The goal of this approach is “to understand more about the phenomenon we are investigating and to describe what we learn with a
minimum of interpretation” (p. 126). This data-analytic strategy is derived from Strauss and Corbin’s (1990) accurate description approach in which researchers seek to create a rich and believable descriptive narrative by “interspers[ing] their own interpretive comments in and around long descriptive passages and the quotations from interview fieldnotes” (p. 22). This inductive approach to qualitative data analysis allows the researcher to discover concepts and propositions directly from the data rather than seeking to verify a priori hypotheses. As Maykut and Morehouse (1994) write, “what becomes important to analyze emerges from the data itself, out of a process of inductive reasoning” (p. 127). These authors use Glaser and Strauss’s (1967) constant comparative method of qualitative analysis to inductively arrive at propositions that remain close to the research participants’ experiences. The basic defining rule of this method is the following: “while coding an incident for a category, compare it with the previous incidents in the same and different groups coded in the same category” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 106).

Using Maykut and Morehouse’s (1994) interpretative-descriptive approach, I analyzed participants’ responses to each of the four open-ended questions and began by reading and rereading the data. During this process, I kept a researcher’s journal in which I wrote down recurring ideas, questions, and thoughts to begin to identify emerging themes and patterns. Following this initial discovery phase, I began the task of categorizing and coding via the constant comparative method. I selected prominent themes from the initial discovery phase and began to group participants’ responses into these categories. Before a response was grouped into a category (or categories), I compared it to all responses that had already been grouped into that category to ensure similarity. I proceeded in this manner until several responses had been grouped together into a provisional category, at which time I wrote a rule of inclusion for that category. These rules were written as propositional statements (i.e., a statement of fact grounded in data), and, in subsequent analyses, all new responses were grouped according to whether they fit the category rule. Following this rigorous categorization procedure, I examined the propositional statements to determine whether relationships and patterns existed across categories; related categories were then grouped into broad clusters reflecting a similar theme.
RESULTS

WOMEN’S UNWANTED SEXUAL EXPERIENCES WITH DATING PARTNERS

Before exploring the factors that influenced how these women labeled their unwanted sexual experiences with dating partners, it is useful to consider the nature and context of the experiences these women described. Table 1 provides descriptive quantitative information about these women’s Significant Experiences. These results indicate that all of the women’s unwanted sexual experiences were perpetrated by men, most of whom were intoxicated and of the same racial or ethnic background as the women. The unwanted sexual experiences most often occurred within the context of casual dating relationships of relatively short duration. Most of the women reported that the behavior occurred only one time, that the situation was no longer going on, and that they were no longer dating the perpetrator. In addition to these quantitative data, many women described their unwanted sexual experiences in the qualitative portion of the survey, and these narratives allow for a more in-depth understanding of the incidents captured by the SES.

More than two thirds of the women (n = 178; 67.9%) reported a Significant Experience that included some form of Unwanted sexual contact (i.e., fondling, kissing, or petting, but not intercourse). Dating partners frequently used overwhelming verbal pressure to get women to engage in unwanted sexual contact, with many women recounting incidents in which dating partners begged, pleaded, and cajoled until they finally gave in to their advances.

He was my serious boyfriend from back home so when he came to visit he would like to “fool around” more often than I would. He would basically beg to mess around.

Dating partners also used emotional manipulation to pressure the women into unwanted sex play by, for example, making them feel guilty and inadequate for being sexually unwilling.

I had dated him for several years and we have always messed around. Sometimes I didn’t feel like it, but he did so he’d brood...
about it until he got his way or if he didn’t get his way, he made me feel selfish by his body language, not by abusing me or yelling at me.

Another common coercive tactic used by perpetrators was simply to ignore the women’s refusals. Many women described inci-

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Significant Experience Item Frequencies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Labelers</strong> (n = 54)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most severe experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual contact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual coercion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attempted rape</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rape</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perpetrator characteristics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opposite sex</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drinking or using drugs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fraternity member</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Varsity athlete</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Same racial or ethnic background</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of dating relationship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Casual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serious</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length of dating relationship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One date</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than a month</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 to 3 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 to 6 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 to 12 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 to 2 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 2 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Still dating the perpetrator?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency of the behavior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Once</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Once a month or less</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two to four times a month</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Every few days</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Every day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is this situation still going on?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**NOTE:** % = percentages of subjects within the group specified at the top of the column who endorsed each item (or subscale of items).
dents of unwanted sexual contact in which their dating partner continued to pressure them despite their repeated nonconsent.

He had a few drinks (wasn’t drunk) and knew that I hadn’t had anything to drink. He assumed that I wanted to do more than just make out. I did not. We were fully clothed and everything but he kept on trying to touch me in different places (my breasts, butt, and vagina) and I would tell him to stop, but he’d try something different.

Furthermore, some of the women were forced to engage in unwanted sexual contact by dating partners who used or threatened violence. For example, one woman described taking part in unwanted sex play because she was afraid the dating partner would harm her if she did not.

His erratic behavior and yelling scared me and the only way to calm him down was to do what he wanted despite the fact that I didn’t want to do anything of that nature, but I felt helpless.

Many of the women (n = 101; 38.5%) described a Significant Experience that involved Sexual coercion (i.e., unwanted sexual intercourse subsequent to the use of overwhelming verbal pressure). Sexual coercion often occurred within the context of serious, long-term dating relationships and involved women eventually giving in to their boyfriends’ advances even though they were not in the mood. Women often acquiesced because they felt it was their duty to sexually satisfy their partner or to avoid causing tension and arguments. For example, one woman wrote the following:

I felt somewhat obligated to him to perform these sexual relations. Meaning, I would feel guilty and be a bad girlfriend if he didn’t get it enough as he thought he should have.

Less often, women reported being coerced into having intercourse with men they did not know well. Such incidents often began as a “hook up” and progressed further than the women wanted. These women often described feeling as if they were unable to stop these encounters once they passed beyond a certain point.
I was very drunk and did not want to have sex with this person. I had just met him and was attracted to him and thought we were just going to make out, and I said no to sex, but he didn’t listen, and I finally just went along with it. But after it was over, he got up and left me there lying naked, and I was so disgusted and embarrassed.

Nearly half of the women (n = 121; 46.4%) described a Significant Experience that included an Attempted rape by a dating partner. The most common tactic used by perpetrators was to attempt intercourse when the women were intoxicated, passed out from drinking, or asleep.

We were both drunk and high…. I was kind of falling asleep, and I remember my friend pulling me on top of him and making out with me. I didn’t know exactly what was going on though. I knew I was there, but I did not feel like it, and this friend had not expressed interest in me before. He laid me down on his couch and started tugging at my shorts. That’s when I finally reacted. . . . Once I reacted, nothing continued further.

Although less common, some of the women experienced attempted rapes in which dating partners threatened or used physical force to try to obtain intercourse, but were unsuccessful.

The . . . situation was with a man I met out. He tried to force sex upon me until I pushed him away and he threw me off the bed and locked the door. I screamed for my friend who started pounding on the door. We went home shortly after.

Finally, more than one third of the women (n = 92; 35.2%) described a Significant Experience involving a Rape by a dating partner. Similar to women’s descriptions of attempted rapes, the most common tactic used by rapists was to engage in intercourse when the women were intoxicated or otherwise unable to give knowing consent.

I had been set up with a male in a fraternity and we had went out and I had had too much to drink. We “made out” for a little before I passed out, and, when I woke up, I realized that he had continued to do things while I was in that state.
Consistent with stereotypical portrayals of rape as a violent act, some of the women reported that their dating partners physically forced them to have sexual intercourse.

This situation was a classic case of date rape. I was very clear that I did not wish to have intercourse, but my dating partner violently forced himself on me.

In addition, some of the women described incidents in which their dating partners physically forced them to engage in sex acts, including anal or oral intercourse or penetration by objects.

I was drinking and so were the two guys... I got way too drunk... and somehow I ended up getting my clothes taken off by them in my bed... [O]ne of the guys... tried to have intercourse with me, but I was awake enough to not let him. He did however use force in getting a blowjob from me [because] he was holding my head and thrusting into it.

In summary, these women reported a variety of unwanted sexual experiences with dating partners, ranging from coerced sex play to violent, forced intercourse. These descriptions make evident that there was no prototypical experience of sexual victimization by a dating partner. Such experiences occurred in casual and serious dating relationships, as single and repeated events, and under a variety of coercive and threatening conditions. Indeed, the only common factors in these women’s experiences were that the sexual activity was unwanted and perpetrated by men.

WHY DO WOMEN LABEL?

Of the 251 women who completed the Significant Experience section, 54 (21.5%) considered their unwanted sexual experience with a dating partner to constitute sexual abuse or assault. These women provided a variety of reasons for labeling their unwanted sexual experiences that were grouped into two general clusters: Issues of consent and Other issues. See Table 2 for a list of categories and their rules for inclusion.
TABLE 2
Why Women Label

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Rules for Inclusion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Issues of consent</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonconsensual sexual activity</td>
<td>The sexual activity occurred without the woman's consent.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I said no</td>
<td>The woman said no and/or told the dating partner to stop.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I didn’t want to</td>
<td>The woman did not want to engage in the sexual activity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical resistance</td>
<td>The woman physically resisted the dating partner’s advances.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical force</td>
<td>The dating partner threatened or used physical force.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pressure or coercion</td>
<td>The woman was pressured, coerced, persuaded, or manipulated to engage in unwanted sexual activity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unable to give knowing consent</td>
<td>The woman was very intoxicated, blacked out, unconscious at the time of the incident.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other issues</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative impact</td>
<td>The woman experienced emotional and/or physical injuries as a result of the incident.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Synonym</td>
<td>The woman used terms synonymous with sexual abuse or assault to describe her experience.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Issues of consent.** Nearly all of the labelers \((n = 50; 92.6\%)\) focused on issues of consent to explain why they considered their unwanted sexual experiences to constitute sexual abuse or assault. Five women \((9.3\%)\) simply stated that the sexual activity was sexual abuse or assault because it occurred without their consent (*Nonconsensual sexual activity*).

- I was not consenting to what occurred. I was not asked before penetration occurred if I wanted penetration to occur.
- It was near penetration without my consent.
- I was drunk and didn’t want to have sex with the person, but they persuaded me for a while, and then went ahead with intercourse without my consent.
More than one third of the women \((n = 19; 35.2\%)\) indicated that they considered their experience to constitute sexual abuse or assault because they clearly expressed that they did not want the sexual activity to occur \((I \text{ said no})\). Indeed, many women reported that they not only said no, but they did so repeatedly.

I consider it to be sexual assault because I didn’t want to do it, and I said NO, and he continued to do it anyways.

Because [I] clearly said no and told him to stop, and he continued with his actions and raped me.

I said no repeatedly, yet it still happened.

In addition, many women \((n = 22; 40.7\%)\) said that they considered their experience to be sexual abuse or assault because they did not want to engage in the sexual activity \((I \text{ didn’t want to})\).

He was trying to make me do something that I didn’t want to do.

I didn’t want to do it but it was done anyway.

Whenever someone is forced to do something sexually that they don’t want to do (either physically or through emotional abuse), it is sexual abuse/assault.

Three women \((5.6\%)\) mentioned their physical resistance as a factor in their decision to label their experience as sexual abuse or assault \((Physical \text{ resistance})\). These women referred to their attempts to physically resist their dating partner’s advances as evidence of their nonconsent.

He kept trying to take off my pants and persuade me to have sex with him even though I kept resisting.

I only remember a little bit of the evening until he forced intercourse. I pushed him off immediately.

Consistent with stereotypical portrayals of rape as a violent crime, several women \((n = 5; 9.3\%)\) considered their experience to constitute sexual abuse or assault because it involved physical force or violence \((Physical \text{ force})\).

My dating partner violently forced himself on me.
Because he used his physical strength to make me do something that I didn’t want to do.

Some women (n = 16; 29.6%) labeled their experience as sexual abuse or assault because they felt they were pressured, coerced, persuaded, or manipulated to engage in unwanted sexual activity (Pressure or coercion).

Because [I] was pressured into something that I didn’t want to do.

Although [I] was not pressured physically, [I] was mentally because [I] was afraid of breaking up.

[He] manipulated me and used guilt and continuous pressure to get me to engage in a sex act with him.

One third of the women (n = 18; 33.3%) considered their experience to constitute sexual abuse or assault because they were too incapacitated to give knowing consent (Unable to give knowing consent). These women described unwanted sexual experiences with dating partners that occurred when they were very intoxicated, blacked out, or unconscious from drinking or drugs.

I was extremely drunk and did not even know what was going on. The person who did this to me was not very drunk, if at all. . . . I do not remember the whole night, but I do know that he had sex with me against my will. I consider that sexual assault.

I was obviously passed out from drinking when this guy tried to have sex with me, the pain woke me up, and I pushed him off me.

Other issues. Although the majority of women provided reasons for labeling that focused on determinations of nonconsent, some of the women (n = 8; 14.8%) said that they felt their unwanted sexual experience constituted sexual abuse or assault because of the negative impact it had on them (Negative impact). These women generally focused on the way the experience made them feel about themselves and the impact it had on their future relationships.

I consider it to be assault because . . . to this day, when I think about where he kept trying to touch me, I feel really dirty, even though I did not give in.
[T]hat experience took away the meaning that sex used to have for me. [N]ow, [I] don’t feel it means as much, if anything, at all.

I felt dirty, and used, and embarrassed.

Finally, several women (n = 5; 9.3%) responded to the question asking them why they considered their experience to constitute sexual abuse or assault by using a synonym to describe their experience. In other words, these women simply stated that they had experienced a type of sexual victimization that is synonymous with sexual abuse or assault (Synonym).

I was raped.

It was a form of acquaintance sexual assault or mild rape.

THE PROCESS OF LABELING

Most of the women who labeled their unwanted sexual experiences with dating partners did not do so immediately; indeed, only 35.2% (n = 19) of the labelers conceptualized their experience as sexual abuse or assault when it first occurred. Instead, labeling generally appears to be a gradual process, and the amount of time that elapsed before women labeled was less than 1 week, but not immediately (n = 16; 29.6%), 1 week to less than 1 month (n = 9; 16.7%), 1 to 6 months (n = 7; 13.0%), 6 to 12 months (n = 2; 3.7%), and more than 1 year (n = 1; 1.9%).

Of the 35 women who did not label immediately, 32 (91.4%) completed the item asking about events or experiences that eventually caused them to define their unwanted sexual experiences as sexual abuse or assault. (See Table 3 for a list of categories and their rules for inclusion.) Seeking social support was the most common event that triggered women to label their unwanted sexual experiences. More than two thirds of the women (n = 22; 68.8%) said that talking to supportive others after the incident led them to define their experience as sexual abuse or assault (Seeking social support).

[I] felt it was my fault, for drinking and flirting and leaving the party, but a close male friend of mine convinced me that it was sexual assault.
I tried to ignore it at first, and then I told a friend in a joking way and realized what it really was.
[4] Talking to my old resident advisor who was a rape counselor.

One quarter of the women \((n = 8; 25.0\%)\) said that simply thinking about what had happened to them led them to eventually label it as sexual abuse or assault \((\text{Thinking about it})\). Some of these women appeared to need time to process their experience, whereas others described initially trying to repress the incident and not allowing themselves to think about it until some time had passed.

[B]asically it has just been me sitting and thinking to myself that that was not right.
Thinking it through on my own.
I had blocked it from my mind, but then I started thinking about it more.

Similar to needing time to reflect on their experience, two women \((6.3\%)\) described undergoing a process of personal growth before they were able to label their experience as sexual abuse or assault \((\text{Personal growth})\).

It takes time for a person to separate their mental being from their emotional being, in order to view the situations they experience in a wiser light. In other words, I had to come to understand that I wasn’t cheap and worthless, in order to realize that I was being sexually abused.
I just grew up a little and saw the incident for what it was.

Two women \((6.3\%)\) indicated that labeling did not occur at the time of the incident because they were intoxicated, but that they defined their experience as sexual abuse or assault once they were sober and able to think clearly about what had happened \((\text{Sobering up})\).

[4]Going back over the events in my mind once [I] was sober.
Just thinking about what had gone on, after I sobered up the next day, made me realize what had actually happened.
Three women (9.4%) said that they came to label their unwanted sexual experience as sexual abuse or assault when they realized how it had damaged them (Negative impact). For example, one woman said that she was prompted to view her experience in a more serious light when she became aware of how it was negatively affecting her future relationships.

As I entered into other relationships, it almost haunted me...it is hard to even be able to realize that something wrong has happened, until it starts to effect other relationships and parts of life. It can be very difficult and scary.

Another woman said that seeing the physical injuries she received during the incident made her define it as sexual abuse or assault.

Looking at my bruises made me realize that there had to be some force involved and that I was not just letting him do it. There were bruises everywhere.

Two women (6.3%) were prompted to label their experience as sexual abuse or assault when they were exposed to educational information about these issues (Educational information).

I read an article on sexual assault or harassment, and the situation I had been in was listed as a form of it.
I read something or heard something about sexual abuse.

Finally, two women (6.3%) reported that they came to view their experience as sexual abuse or assault when they discovered that the perpetrator had done similar things to other women (Repeat offender).

My friend went through a similar experience with the same person.
I also recently found out this guy was charged with rape, so I realized it probably wasn’t my fault, even though I had been making out with him earlier that night.
WHY DO WOMEN NOT LABEL?

Of the 251 women who completed the Significant Experience section, 197 (78.5%) did not consider their unwanted sexual experience with a dating partner to constitute sexual abuse or assault. These women provided a variety of reasons for not labeling their unwanted sexual experiences that were grouped into five general clusters: Victim-focused, Perpetrator-focused, Incident-focused, Minimization, and Other. See Table 4 for a list of categories and their rules for inclusion.

**Victim-focused.** Many of the women focused on their own behavior during the incident, reasoning that their experience was not sexual abuse or assault because of something they had done or failed to do. As with the women who did label their experiences, issues of consent were a common concern among nonlabelers. Nearly one quarter of the women ($n = 48; 24.4\%$) indicated that they did not consider their unwanted sexual experience to constitute sexual abuse or assault because they had given coerced consent (Coerced consent). Although the sexual activity
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Rules for Inclusion</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Victim-focused</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coerced consent</td>
<td>The woman gave in to or went along with requests or pressure to engage in unwanted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>sexual activity.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Intoxicated consent</td>
<td>The woman was under the influence of alcohol or drugs at the time of the incident and</td>
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<td></td>
<td>consented to unwanted sexual activity as a result.</td>
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<tr>
<td>I did not say no</td>
<td>The woman did not say “no” or clearly tell her partner that the sexual activity was</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>unwanted.</td>
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<tr>
<td>It was my fault</td>
<td>The woman blames herself for the incident and/or believes she did something that</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>caused it to occur.</td>
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<tr>
<td>I could have stopped it</td>
<td>The woman believes she could have stopped the incident or escaped the situation,</td>
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<td></td>
<td>but chose not to.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Perpetrator-focused</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>He didn’t mean to</td>
<td>The woman believes the dating partner did not realize the sexual activity was</td>
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<td></td>
<td>unwanted or did not intend to harm her.</td>
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<td>I like or love him</td>
<td>The woman cared about the perpetrator at the time of the incident and may still</td>
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<td>consider him to be a friend or boyfriend.</td>
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<tr>
<td>He stopped</td>
<td>The dating partner stopped his advances after the woman made it clear that the</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>sexual activity was unwanted.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Incident-focused</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No physical force</td>
<td>No force or physical violence was used and the woman did not feel physically</td>
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<td></td>
<td>threatened to engage in sexual activity.</td>
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<tr>
<td>No intercourse</td>
<td>The incident did not involve completed sexual intercourse.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Minimization</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>It was no big deal</td>
<td>The woman believes the incident was not serious enough to be considered sexual abuse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>or assault.</td>
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<tr>
<td>No serious harm was done</td>
<td>The incident did not cause serious physical or emotional damage.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Typical boy-girl relations</td>
<td>The woman believes the incident reflects normal heterosexual dating behavior (e.g.,</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>men are always horny and women are rarely in the mood).</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Other</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsure how to label</td>
<td>The woman is confused or uncertain about whether her experience constitutes sexual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>abuse or assault.</td>
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was unwanted and often distressing, these women did not label because they ultimately gave in to or went along with their dating partner’s advances.

Because [I] said yes even though [I] didn’t want to because [I] didn’t want him to get mad.

Because I kept giving in to him, and I couldn’t help but saying yes when he asked me because he’s done so much other stuff for me. I felt bad saying no, so I did all the stuff he wanted me to. I needed to feel wanted, and he made me feel wanted.

Because, in the end, I did say yes even though it was only because he kept being persistent.

Some women (n = 10; 5.1%) felt that their unwanted sexual experience did not constitute sexual abuse or assault because they were under the influence of alcohol or drugs at the time and may have consented to unwanted sexual activity as a result (Intoxicated consent). Unlike the labelers who found themselves in similar circumstances, these women did not believe their intoxication rendered them unable to give knowing consent. Rather, they appeared only to view their intoxication as having made them consent to sexual activity that they would not otherwise have engaged in.

[I] consented because [I] was drunk, [I] just wish [I] hadn’t.

Because I was drunk and gave consent, but cannot remember what really happened.

In contrast to women who felt that they said “yes” to sexual activity, some women (n = 18; 9.1%) did not label their experience as sexual abuse or assault because they felt that they had failed to say “no” or to clearly tell their partner that the sexual activity was unwanted (I did not say no). These women described incidents in which they engaged in unwanted sexual activity because they were unable or unwilling to verbalize their lack of interest.

Because [I] never told the person not to, even though [I] didn’t want them to.

I didn’t say yes, but [I] didn’t say no.
I do it because I love him, and I feel bad that I don’t have those types of sexual feelings for him and he has them for me. He doesn’t know that I don’t want to do it. ... I just don’t know how to tell him that I don’t want to, so I continue to do it until I can find the words.

Nearly one quarter of the women \( n = 44; 22.3\% \) did not consider their experience to constitute sexual abuse or assault because they believed that they had done something to cause it to occur \( (It \ was \ my \ fault) \). Because they held themselves at least partially responsible for the incident, these women felt it was inappropriate to classify their experience as sexual abuse or assault. Some of these women expressed general sentiments that the incident was their fault.

It was just a bad judgment call on my behalf.
I should’ve known better.
I put myself into a situation that I didn’t need to be in.

Other women described specific reasons for feeling as if they were to blame for the incident. For example, some women did not feel their experience constituted sexual abuse or assault because they felt they had flirted with, or made advances toward, the perpetrator.

Because I felt as if I led the guy on.
I kind of felt like a tease.

Several women blamed themselves for the incident because they were drunk or high at the time it occurred. These women appeared to believe that, because they had allowed themselves to become intoxicated, the experience did not constitute sexual abuse or assault.

I was drunk and didn’t put up a fight and gave in. Therefore, I feel I am partially responsible for what happened.

Because alcohol and drugs were a contributing factor to the incident, I feel I could have done more to forestall it from occurring.

Other women felt that the incident was their fault because they did not do enough to try to stop it from occurring. Because they
believed they should have done more to resist, these women did not feel it was appropriate to label their experience as sexual abuse or assault.

Because I didn’t do much to stop it from happening.
He was pushy, but it is my fault that I didn’t stop him.
Because [I] let it happen. I could have been more forceful.
Because I really didn’t fight it.

In contrast to women who appeared to possess a vague sense of not having tried hard enough to resist the perpetrator, some women ($n = 35; 17.8\%$) expressed a firm belief that they were capable of stopping him, but had chosen not to (I could have stopped it). These women said that they did not label their experience as sexual abuse or assault because they felt confident that they could have stopped it from happening. Whether this is true is, of course, impossible to determine. Some of these women simply stated that they could have chosen not to engage in the sexual activity.

Because [I] gave in. . . . [I] didn’t have to, [I] was just tired of constant bugging and [I] did like him at the time.
I did not have to agree to anything.
I could have easily declined with no threat of harm.

Other women focused more on their presumed ability to thwart the perpetrator, stating that they could have made him stop if they had really wanted to. These women generally believed that they would have only had to more clearly express their lack of interest and the perpetrator would have stopped his advances.

I should have been more vocal. . . . If he had known that I meant it, he would have stopped.
I could have said no, and he would have stopped.
If I had forcefully said no, it would have ended.

Perpetrator-focused. In addition to focusing on their own behavior, many of the women referred to the perpetrator’s intentions or
behavior to explain why they did not consider their unwanted sexual experience to constitute sexual abuse or assault. Several women (n = 19; 9.6%) provided excuses for their dating partner’s behavior, suggesting that it had been unintentional or accidental (He didn’t mean to). These women did not consider their experience to constitute sexual abuse or assault because they believed that the perpetrator did not mean to pressure or force them to engage in unwanted sexual activity. Sometimes, the incidents were described as misunderstandings, and the women believed that the dating partner had not realized that the sexual activity was unwanted.

I just don’t think he understood that I didn’t want him to keep on doing that and that it didn’t feel good.

I don’t know if he knew I didn’t want to.

Several women described incidents that occurred when the perpetrator was under the influence of alcohol or drugs. In such cases, the perpetrator’s behavior was excused because he was assumed to be unable to control himself or to be unaware of what he was doing.

The incident was with a friend who was drunk, and he would never have done that if he was sober.

I think that it was mainly alcohol that had to deal with the situations that happened. . . . It was the addiction that he needed help with. It drove him to do things or be more “pressuring” when he was intoxicated. It wasn’t him, it was his disease. He would not act like that when he was sober.

Some women focused on the fact that they did not believe the perpetrator had meant to harm or upset them to explain why they did not label.

[I] know him well enough to understand him and know that he didn’t want to hurt me or do anything to violate me.

I don’t think he meant to harm me or offend me.

He was my serious boyfriend of a very long time, and the only reason it happened is because he didn’t think he was hurting me, he was drunk, and it was nonintentional.
In addition to focusing on their dating partner’s intentions, some women (n = 28; 14.2%) said that they did not label their experience because they were attached to the perpetrator in some way (I like or love him). Because these women cared about the person who had done this to them, and may still have considered him to be a friend or boyfriend, they were unwilling to view the incident as sexual abuse or assault.

I liked the person I was with. Although I sometimes felt pressured into sexual intercourse, we were friends and it wasn’t a horrible situation.

[I] have a trusting relationship with this person.

[B]ecause we were/are in love.

Other women (n = 17; 8.6%) did not label their experience because their dating partner stopped his advances when they asked him to (He stopped). These women felt that it was inappropriate to define their experience as sexual abuse or assault because the perpetrator was eventually, if not immediately, respectful of their nonconsent.

[O]nce I convinced him that I did not want to, he stopped.

As soon as he started his attempt, I told him no and, although I had to say it again later, he stopped.

We were both under the influence, and, even though he was insistent, his efforts stopped after I said no, sternly.

*Incident-focused.* Many of the women referred to the characteristics of the unwanted sexual experience itself to explain why they did not label. Many women (n = 40; 20.3%) indicated that they did not consider their experience to constitute sexual abuse or assault because it did not involve physical force or violence (*No physical force*).

It was not sexual abuse or assault because both of those terms are violent, and this was a nonviolent event.

There was no force or physical violence involved.

He did not force himself on me. . . . Nothing violent happened.
Similarly, several women said that they did not label their experience because they did not feel physically threatened at the time.

It wasn’t sexual abuse or assault because I didn’t feel threatened in any way to go along.

[T]here was no threat to my personal safety.
I don’t feel as though it was very threatening.

Several of the women (n = 10; 5.1%) did not define their experience as sexual abuse or assault because completed sexual intercourse did not occur (No intercourse). These women were able to get away from the dating partner or stop the encounter before intercourse occurred and, thus, they did not classify their experience as sexual abuse or assault.

[I] was . . . able to stop him before intercourse occurred.
[I]t was more of a kissing thing than anything else . . . it wasn’t sex.
[I]t wasn’t a big deal.

Minimization. Some of the women minimized the seriousness of their experience to explain why they did not label. Several women (n = 16; 8.1%) simply indicated that they did not define their experience as sexual abuse or assault because they believed it was not very serious (It was no big deal).

I really don’t think that the situation I’m thinking of was anything of that magnitude.
I did feel as though he was violating me, but at the same time, it wasn’t to a degree of sexual abuse.
[I]t wasn’t a big deal.
It really wasn’t that bad.

Another common minimization strategy was to acknowledge that the experience occurred, but maintain that it caused little or no physical or emotional damage. Several women (n = 18; 9.1%) minimized their experience in this way, indicating that they did not consider it to be sexual abuse or assault because they did not believe they had been seriously harmed by it (No serious harm was done).
It didn’t leave me extremely wounded.
I think that it would have to be a little more traumatic to me to be either abuse or assault.

Some women ($n = 20; 10.2\%$) minimized their experience by describing it as normal heterosexual dating behavior (Typical boy-girl relations). These women appeared to minimize their dating partner’s behavior because he was acting in accord with heterosexual dating scripts that place men in the role of the seducer and initiator of sexual activity.

He was horny, I was tired. Typical boy-girl relations.
In my experience, most guys are going to try to have sex if they believe there is any chance at all.
Because the guy was just trying to get some and he wasn’t going to get too much from me.

Other. It is important to note that a few women ($n = 6; 3.0\%$), although they did not label at the time of the survey, appeared to be in the beginning phases of questioning whether their unwanted sexual experience may have been sexual abuse or assault (Unsure how to label). Some of these women expressed confusion about the terms sexual abuse and sexual assault, whereas others said they felt unsure about what to call their experience. Given that labeling appears to be a process that unfolds over time, it seems likely that some of these women may eventually come to label their experience as sexual abuse or assault.

Isn’t it rape if you are drunk and you don’t actually say “yes” to sex? If it is still assault, even though I participated willingly, though drunk, in the beginning, then I don’t know my terms. Maybe it is attempted rape or assault.

He didn’t physically hurt me. . . . [I]’m sure in some technical terms it is [sexual abuse or assault], but it wasn’t physical.
Is giving in to sex or sex play under the pressure of your partner at the same level as the other acts . . . if there has never been any physical threat? I have done that before, and I will not say it is nothing because it makes me feel incredibly bad about myself sometimes.
ALTernate Labels for Unwanted Sexual Experiences with Dating Partners

Of the 197 women who did not label their unwanted sexual experiences as sexual abuse or assault, 187 (95%) completed the item asking them how they did define their experience. These women used a variety of alternate labels that were grouped into three general clusters to describe what had happened to them: Minimization, Victimization, and Other. See Table 5 for a list of categories and their rules for inclusion.

Minimization. Many women provided alternate labels for their unwanted sexual experiences that were consistent with efforts to
conceptualize the incident as something less serious than sexual abuse or assault. Nearly one quarter of the women \((n = 46; 23.4\%)\) defined their experience as some form of pressure, coercion, or manipulation and referred to their dating partner’s efforts to get them to give in to unwanted sexual activity (Pressure).

Badgering, bothering someone until they give in.
Persuasion.
Excessive pressure.

Several women \((n = 9; 4.6\%)\) labeled their experience as a misunderstanding, often suggesting that they had failed to adequately communicate their lack of interest to their dating partner (Misunderstanding).

Not understanding the other person.
A misunderstanding, lack of communication.

Similarly, some of the women \((n = 28; 14.2\%)\) defined the incident as a mistake, bad judgment, or stupidity on their part (A mistake). These women generally expressed regret for their alleged error in judgment and viewed the incident as their own fault.

Extreme stupidity.
A bad decision based on the influence of alcohol.
A mistake or lapse in judgment.

Some of the women \((n = 15; 7.6\%)\) simply defined the unwanted sexual experience as something that had been annoying, frustrating, or bothersome (Annoying). These women often expressed their displeasure with their dating partner’s behavior, but did not view it as more than an aggravation.

Annoying boyfriend.
Annoying male behavior.
Just an annoyance of a sexually energized young man.
Other women \((n = 19; 9.6\%)\) focused on issues related to the male sex drive and referred to their dating partner’s sexual desire or interest to define their experience (Male sex drive).

Horny boyfriend.
Sexual frustration.
A boy attempting to get sex.

Similarly, some women \((n = 10; 5.1\%)\) defined their experience as normal sex or dating behavior (Normal sex). Although their experiences were unwanted and sometimes distressing, these women appeared to believe that this was normal and to be expected within heterosexual dating relationships.

It was just sex.
I don’t know . . . one-night stand?
I see this situation as hooking up.

Victimization. Although they did not define their unwanted sexual experiences as sexual abuse or assault, some nonlabelers provided alternate definitions for their experiences that clearly reflected their belief that they had been victimized in some way. Several women \((n = 12; 6.1\%)\) defined their unwanted sexual experiences as being taken advantage of (Taking advantage). Some of these women described experiences in which they had engaged in unwanted sexual activity when they were intoxicated, whereas others said they had been taken advantage of because they were young, naïve, or lacking in self-confidence.

I define this situation as him taking advantage of me, knowing that I wasn’t in a sober state.

Trying to take advantage of drunk women.
I think that it would just be a lack of self-esteem on my part, and his taking advantage of it at that time.

A few women \((n = 7; 3.6\%)\) used synonyms for sexual abuse and assault to define their unwanted sexual experiences (Synonym). It seems likely that these women were confused about the mean-
ing of the terms sexual abuse and sexual assault and, thus, did not realize that the label they provided was synonymous.

- Forceful sexual intercourse.
- Careless date rape.
- Attempted sexual assault.
- A mild definition of date rape.

Similarly, a few women ($n = 5; 2.5\%$) defined their unwanted sexual experience as some type of abuse or victimization other than sexual abuse or assault (Other abuse). These women clearly felt victimized by the behavior, but did not view it as congruent with their internal definitions of sexual abuse and assault.

- [I] see it more as emotional and psychological abuse and manipulation rather than sexual abuse.
- I’d consider this more a case of sexual harassment, with repeated, uninvited comments and fondling.
- Possibly dating abuse.

Other. Finally, some of the women ($n = 19; 9.6\%$) responded that they either did not know what to label their experience or they did not define it as anything (Nothing or do not know). These women were perhaps hidden victims in the truest sense, as they were left without any type of label to describe what had happened to them.

- I’m not quite sure what to call what happened.
- I don’t really think it has a term.
- I don’t know how I would define this situation.

**DISCUSSION**

The first goal of the present research was to provide insight into the reasons women do or do not label their unwanted sexual experiences with dating partners as sexual abuse or assault. Given that determinations of nonconsent have historically played a central role in distinguishing sexual abuse and assault from nonvictimizing sexual behaviors (Muehlenhard et al., 1992), it is
perhaps not surprising that issues of consent appear to be central to understanding why the women in the present study did or did not label. More specifically, women who labeled often described unwanted sexual experiences in which evidence of their nonconsent was sufficient to allow them to believe they could legitimately claim the label of sexual abuse or assault victim. Most often, lack of consent has been defined according to various aspects of the victim’s behavior, such as verbal nonconsent and physical resistance (Donat & White, 2000; Muehlenhard et al., 1992). In the present study, many of the labelers reported that they had clearly and often repeatedly expressed their verbal nonconsent. In contrast, nonlabelers often focused on the fact that they felt they had not adequately expressed their nonconsent or they had eventually given in to unwanted sexual activity because of pressure or coercion. These findings are consistent with previous research indicating that acknowledged rape victims are more likely than unacknowledged rape victims to have made it very clear to the perpetrator that they did not want sex (Layman et al., 1996). However, the present results also highlight an important issue in the sexual victimization literature regarding sexual coercion. Just as there is significant debate in academic realms about whether sexual coercion constitutes a form of sexual victimization (Carlin, 1998; Donat & White, 2000; Gavey, 1992, Gilbert, 1991), women in the present study also varied in their perspectives on whether sexual coercion should be defined as sexual abuse or assault. Some sexually coerced women labeled their unwanted sexual experiences as abusive or assaultive, whereas some did not, instead using terms such as excessive pressure and manipulation to define their experiences. Future research could more closely examine the experiences and perspectives of sexually coerced women to determine what factors differentiate between labelers and nonlabelers.

Another method of determining nonconsent focuses on the presence of incapacitating circumstances (e.g., intoxication) that render the victim unable to give knowing consent (Muehlenhard et al., 1992). In the present study, alcohol and drugs frequently played a role in women’s unwanted sexual experiences, as well as in the labeling process. Many of the women who believed they had been sexually abused or assaulted mentioned the presence of incapacitating circumstances as a factor in their decision to label.
These women typically described incidents that had occurred when they were extremely drunk, blacked out, or unconscious. An interesting finding was that alcohol and drug use did not play any less of a role in the unwanted sexual experiences of women who did not label; rather, these women appeared not to perceive their intoxication as diminishing their ability to give knowing consent. Moreover, many of these women did not label because they viewed their intoxication as evidence that they were to blame for the incident. Although previous research has generally found that women are less likely to label assaults that occur when they are intoxicated (Botta & Pingree, 1997; Kahn et al., 2003; Layman et al., 1996; Schwartz & Leggett, 1999), the present results suggest that, in some cases, intoxication may cause women to label. An interesting avenue for future research would be to determine under what circumstances intoxication facilitates versus impedes labeling.

The use or threat of physical force by the perpetrator is also considered to be evidence of the victim’s nonconsent (Muehlenhard et al., 1992). Previous theories of labeling have primarily addressed the issue of physical force in terms of the stereotypes of rape that victims may hold, suggesting that many women fail to label because their experience may not conform to their internal definitions of rape as a violent crime (Kahn et al., 1994; Koss & Cleveland, 1997). Stereotypes regarding what constitutes real rape are pervasive in our culture and typically are restricted to incidents involving a high level of physical force. As Estrich (1987) notes, “Many women continue to believe that men can force you to have sex against your will and that it isn’t rape so long as they know you and don’t beat you nearly to death in the process” (p. 4). The present results are consistent with these suggestions; many nonlabelers stated that they did not consider their unwanted sexual experience to constitute sexual abuse or assault because their dating partner did not use physical force or violence, whereas several of the labelers said that they defined their experience as sexual abuse or assault because they had been physically forced to engage in unwanted sexual activity. These results are consistent with previous research indicating that women who experience a high amount of force are more likely to label their experience as rape (Frazier & Seales, 1997; Kahn et al., 1994; Kahn et al., 2003; Koss, 1985; Layman et al., 1996).
In addition to focusing on issues of consent, many of the women provided causal attributions to explain why they did not consider their unwanted sexual experiences to constitute sexual abuse or assault. Attribution theory suggests that women would be more likely to interpret a behavior as sexual abuse or assault if it can be attributed to the characteristics, motivations, or enduring traits of the perpetrator (Pryor, 1985). Conversely, if characteristics of the victim are viewed as playing a role in causing the behavior, the perpetrator’s role will be minimized, and the behavior may be less likely to be viewed as sexual abuse or assault (Pryor, 1985). Accordingly, many of the women indicated that they did not label their unwanted sexual experiences because they held themselves at least partially responsible for the incident or did not blame the perpetrator for his actions. In addition, women often reported that they cared about the perpetrator and, thus, did not believe he had meant to cause them harm. These beliefs are reflective of rape myths suggesting that women cause or provoke rape and that men do not mean to perpetrate rape (Payne, Lonsway, & Fitzgerald, 1999). Thus, rape myths may impede labeling by teaching women to blame themselves for their victimization and to absolve the perpetrator of responsibility for his actions.

Many women in the present study provided reasons for not labeling that were indicative of attempts to minimize their unwanted sexual experiences. These women often asserted that the incident had not been a big deal, that they had not been seriously harmed by it, and that it was just typical heterosexual dating behavior. Previous work has theorized that women may minimize their unwanted sexual experiences in an effort to avoid the aversive social and personal consequences associated with the victim role (Janoff-Bulman & Frieze, 1983; Koss & Cleveland, 1997; Taylor et al., 1983). Given the malevolent social context that often surrounds victims of these crimes (Koss & Cleveland, 1997), many women may simply choose to minimize their unwanted sexual experiences to avoid being isolated, stigmatized, blamed, and not taken seriously by others. Similarly, women may minimize their unwanted sexual experiences to avoid the psychological costs of identifying oneself as a victim, a role that may lead women to view themselves as weak, needy, frightened, vulnerable, and out of control (Janoff-Bulman & Frieze, 1983). Such attempts to devictimize themselves by minimizing what has
happened to them may prevent many women from labeling their unwanted sexual experiences as sexual abuse or assault.

The second goal of the present research was to examine the route by which women come to label their unwanted sexual experiences as sexual abuse or assault. The data confirm that labeling is often a gradual process and may not occur for weeks, months, or even years after the incident. These results are consistent with the work of Kelly (1988), who found that more than 60% of the women in her sample did not initially define their experiences as a form of sexual violence and that about 70% of the women changed their definitions of their experiences over time, almost always in the direction of relabeling an incident as abuse. The gradual process of labeling is compatible with Lazarus’s (1983) stage-related concept of denial, which suggests that the disavowal of reality is usually a temporary coping mechanism that helps people to get through the overwhelming early period following a loss. Moreover, Lazarus (1983) contends that this initial denial sets the stage for later acknowledgment of the situation and the use of more realistic coping strategies. Consistent with previous research (Pitts & Schwartz, 1993), the results also indicate that, when it does occur, labeling is most often triggered by the victim’s disclosure of their experience to supportive others.

Finally, the present work examined the alternate labels used by women who do not consider their unwanted sexual experiences to constitute sexual abuse or assault. Janoff-Bulman and Frieze (1983) propose that victims may attempt to redefine their experience as something other than a harmful stressor to minimize the threat it poses to their sense of personal invulnerability, their perception of the world as meaningful, and their view of themselves in a positive light. Accordingly, most of the nonlabelers provided alternate definitions that were consistent with efforts to conceptualize their unwanted sexual experiences as something less serious or harmful than sexual abuse or assault. However, some of the women provided labels for their experiences that clearly reflected their belief that they had been victimized in some way, perhaps indicating that they were in the beginning stages of labeling.

The present study has several limitations. First, the overall response rate obtained for the survey (37%) is considerably lower than other studies of sexual victimization among college women
that have not used mail survey methodologies (Fisher et al., 2000; Koss et al., 1987). Second, the overall sample was not completely representative of the population from which it was drawn, and racial or ethnic minorities were underrepresented. More generally, the use of a primarily White college student sample may limit the generalizability of the findings. Finally, the present study assessed a broader range of unwanted sexual experiences (e.g., sexual coercion) than are currently included in legal definitions of sexual abuse and assault. This was done because the objective of the present study was to examine why and how women do or do not conceptualize their unwanted sexual experiences as sexually abusive or assaultive and was not to determine women’s accuracy, from a legal perspective, in labeling their unwanted sexual experiences. Thus, the present results do not speak to whether women were correctly labeling their unwanted sexual experiences according to legal definitions.

Despite several decades of feminist consciousness-raising efforts, the present results confirm that the terms sexual abuse and sexual assault are still rarely used by women to describe their unwanted sexual experiences with dating partners. This difficulty in identifying unwanted sexual experiences as abusive has significant implications for victims, perpetrators, and the larger social and political context. If women do not recognize that they have been sexually abused or assaulted, then they may be less likely to seek treatment, understand their psychological distress, or avoid revictimization (Layman et al., 1996; Pitts & Schwartz, 1993). Women’s difficulty labeling their unwanted sexual experiences as sexual abuse and assault may also decrease the likelihood that they will report to the police or other agencies when the experience meets legal criteria for these crimes and may therefore lead to a lack of deterrence for perpetrators (Pitts & Schwartz, 1993; Schwartz & Leggett, 1999). Ultimately, this failure to label sexual abuse and assault may hinder social and political change by preventing recognition of the pervasiveness of male violence against women and keeping women from uniting to solve legitimate common problems (Lamb, 1999). The present results suggest that educational efforts that provide clear behavioral definitions of sexual abuse and assault, explain the various ways nonconsent can be defined, challenge rape myths that promote
victim blaming, and refute stereotypes of what constitutes real rape may be particularly effective in empowering women to “nam[e] the unnameable” (Warshaw, 1988, p. 1).

NOTES

1. Throughout this article, the term labeling is used to refer to women’s use of the terms sexual abuse and sexual assault to describe and conceptualize their unwanted sexual experiences. Accordingly, women who label their unwanted sexual experiences as sexual abuse or assault are referred to as labelers, whereas women who label their experiences as something other than sexual abuse or assault are referred to as nonlabelers. It should be noted, however, that, in the majority of cases, nonlabelers did label their unwanted sexual experiences in some way, just not as sexual abuse or assault.

2. Although the terms sexual abuse and sexual assault were selected to be consistent with legal terminology used to refer to the full range of sexual assault violations in the state in which the study was conducted, it should be noted that the present study does not presume that all of the unwanted sexual experiences assessed would meet legal criteria for criminal sexual abuse or assault.

3. Sophomores and juniors were selected to ensure that the sample would not include students who may have participated in a previous data collection that took place in the spring of 1999. (Sophomores and juniors had not yet enrolled at the university at the time of the first data collection, whereas seniors would have been freshmen at that time.) In addition, freshmen were not included in the sample because the measures only assessed experiences at the university, and these students had only been matriculated for approximately one month when the data collection began.

4. Twenty-six women reported an unwanted sexual experience with a dating partner on the Sexual Experiences Survey but did not complete the open-ended qualitative items.

REFERENCES


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