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Theory Review: Critical Feminist and Communicated Narrative Sense-Making Theory

I will be looking at how Critical Feminist Theory and Communicated Narrative Sense-Making has been used in research relating to sexual violence on college campuses. I chose these theories because I wanted to look at the CNSM theory through a feminist lens. I will start with an overview of both theories, followed by a literature review of the theories in relation to my topic. This will be followed with a discussion of the continued relevance of CFT and CNSM and directions for future research within its realms.

Critical Feminist Theory

CFT has foundations in both critical theory and feminist theory. Overall, CFT focuses on “gender, voice, representation, difference and power.” The theory looks at how these elements intersect and contribute to patriarchal structures of oppression and knowledge. Communication for CFT is the medium in which the patriarchy (and other oppressive forces) is both reaffirmed and resisted. Critical theory looks at the experiences a person/people have had and is not limited to just women. Feminism, and also feminist theory, grounds itself in the knowledge that patriarchal structures have limited women’s choices, voices, and visibility. Feminist theorists explore the existence and consequences of sex and gender identities at multiple levels. Feminist theory “comes out of the sense-making process of becoming feminist and navigating a way through the world.”

CFT has been used in past research, with four current trends. A limitation of CFT is that there has been an oversaturated focus on white women. There has been a shift to centering on

Black women. The Strong Black Women Collective theory provides an example of CFT. There has also been research done in relation to the historic racist language used to affirm violence against Black women.

Another trend is disclosing women's health in relationships. Women have the power to shape the narratives of their own bodies in interpersonal relationships. Quite often in heterosexual relationships, there is a focus on male satisfaction and one study looked at how heterosexual women navigated vulvodynia, a chronic genital pain condition. There is also a trend surrounding women navigating identity shifts in relationships. A previous study looked at women who moved from identifying as child-free (choosing not to have children) to (possible) future mothers. The study concluded that both genders create "pronatalist face-threats to discipline individuals diverging from normative behaviors of pursuing parenthood." Lastly, CFT has been used in research related to couples' struggles with work-life negotiations. There are inequities in romantic relationships, including the division of household duties and other aspects of work-life balance.

Communicated Narrative Sense-Making Theory

Storytelling has the capacity to help people connect, construct identities, teach lessons, and cope with life's complexities. Storytelling is a form of interpersonal communication. CNSM focuses on the content and process of storytelling and how it relates to individual and relational health and well-being. It began with a research study that set out to test the relationship between one's ability to tell a complete breakup story and breakup adjustment. It has shaped into looking at storytelling as serving the functions of "creating identity, socializing others to meanings, values, and beliefs, making sense of and coping with difficulty, and connecting with other people."

The main goals of CNSM are as follows - to (a) understand how the communication of stories (storytelling) helps people make sense of their lives and (b) how the content and process of communicated narrative sense-making affects and reflects individual and relational health and well-being. CNSM consists of three sets of principles: retrospective storytelling, interactional storytelling, and translational storytelling. Retrospective storytelling is concerned with the significant and lasting impact of the stories people hear and tell. When studying retrospective one, proposition 1 of the CNSM theory asserts that the “content of storytelling reveals individual, relational, and intergenerational meaning-making, values and beliefs. Interactional storytelling looks at the verbal and nonverbal processes of storytelling. Proposition 3 of the CNSM theory asserts that the higher levels of interactional sense-making (ISM) predict higher levels of narrative sense-making. Proposition 4 builds on 3 to suggest that higher levels of ISM predict higher levels of individual and relational health and well-being. Translational storytelling uses narrative theories, methods, and empirical results to create interventions designed to improve well-being. Proposition 6 of the CNSM theory states that “interventions that promote narrative reflection and sense-making benefit participants in the context of difficulty, trauma, illness, and/or stress.” Proposition 7 builds off proposition 6 with: “Interventions that incorporate (a) positive narrative (re)framing techniques and/or (b) high levels of ISM will result in benefits for individuals and families in the context of difficulty, trauma, illness, and/or stress.”

Most of the published research relating to CNSM focuses on family storytelling and investigates proposition 1 of retrospective storytelling. Some of the themes covered in prior research have been stories about mental illness in families, children coming out to their parents, and/or spousal miscarriage stories, etc.

Review of the Literature

There has been plenty of research done in the past relating to sexual violence on college campuses. This research has evolved since the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to the pandemic, students were forced to transition to online classes. The world has been able to return to some normalcy since 2020 - with the help of the vaccines and booster shots. Both new and returning college students have gone back to college campuses since the worldwide lockdowns. New reports have shown that students returning to college after the pandemic are at a larger risk of being sexually assaulted. Students that identify as LGBTQ+ and/or having a disability experience sexual assault at the same rate as heterosexual women but experience institutional betrayal at a much larger rate. CFT has been overwhelmingly focused on white women in the past. In the post-pandemic world, new research is focusing on women of color, people of the LGBTQ+ community, and people with disabilities.

CNSM theory is a fairly new theory. It has mainly served in aiding families through familial issues or helped couples after a breakup. Many of the incidents of sexual violence on campuses have been tied to alcohol consumption. In order to address this issue, each university has different training for incoming freshmen students relating to alcohol and sexual violence. This training helps to inform students about resources and serve as a way of prevention. Students across multiple universities have been critical of the contents of the training- considering it to be non-inclusive and irrelevant to their experiences.

Post-Pandemic and #MeToo

According to Erin Bonar, PhD, an associate professor in the Department of Psychiatry at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, students returning to college campuses since the beginning of the pandemic are at a larger risk of being sexually assaulted. Students coming back

to campus after lockdown are looking for some normalcy which leads to them attending more parties, getting together with friends more frequently and consuming alcohol.

A study out of the University of Arizona found that one out of every three women in college say that they have been sexually assaulted in either high school or college. Women are more likely to be the ones who fall victim to sexual violence. In some universities, women are taught sexual assault risk reduction and resistance education in isolation - which is problematic and does nothing to address the real issue. I believe sexual violence can happen to men as well - but statistically, men are more prone to commit acts of sexual violence in college. If sexual assault cases are on the rise in the post-pandemic world - then taking the same approach to preventing and addressing the issue is going to be ineffective.

The awareness of sexual violence on college campuses has only grown since the rise of the #MeToo movement. As sexual violence keeps rising across the nation, more students have taken to protests and activism to address the issue. From May 2021 to August 2022, there were over 309 protests on campuses related to sexual violence. Universities have taken similar approaches in response: suspending fraternities, reinforcing prevention training for students, and establishing student advisory boards on Title IX. The issue has become so prominent that activism has become a "part-time".

Student Activism

Cases of sexual violence are more likely to happen during the fall semester - from August to before Thanksgiving. For example, at Indiana University at Bloomington, 35 sexual assaults were reported during this time span. In August 2021, students at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln protested for several days after an alleged sexual assault at a fraternity there. The following month, more than 100 students at Virginia Tech protested a pattern of sexual assault at

sporting events and university gatherings. Students have begun to join grassroots organizations like Know Your IX and End Rape on Campus. Know Your IX was co-founded in 2014 by Amherst College student Dana Bolger and Yale Law School student Alexandra Brodsky. End Rape on Campus was co-founded in 2013 by Sofie Karasek and Annie Clark and has been credited as being the organization that brought the issue of sexual violence on college campuses to the national level. Both organizations are calling for the Education Department to make changes to Title IX. Title IX prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex in educational institutions that receive federal funding (which is the majority of universities).

Alcohol Consumption

Alcohol has become more common in sexual assault cases since the pandemic. In a study from the University of Arizona, 75% of women who have been sexually assaulted say that they were incapacitated by alcohol at the time of their sexual assault. While one of every eight men in college have admitted to having committed sexual assault. The same study also found that nine out of every ten men say that they have perpetuated sexual assault while their victims were incapacitated by alcohol.

University Prevention Training

When looking at surveys relating to the prevention training that universities require, the same conclusions can be drawn. The training is non-inclusive and neglects to include relevant real-life college experiences. Many students agree that the training should not be just a one time thing and should be integrated across the years a student is in university. Lastly, many sexual assault incidents often take place at fraternity and sporting events.

Discussion

Universities have taken the same approaches to tackling this issue as they did before the pandemic but it is not effective. The rates keep going up and students are protesting and demanding changes. To see this issue through CFT is crucial as the main group that falls victim to sexual violence on college campuses are women. This issue cannot be solely defined as a woman's issue though. Sexual minorities and students with disabilities experience sexual violence at the same rate as heterosexual students. They are often the ones to experience institutional betrayal at a much higher rate. As a result, this leads to greater negative psychological and physical health outcomes.

The CNSM theory was applied in a survey conducted of undergraduate students who attended a student-driven production covering topics of sexual violence, heterosexism, and racism. The production was well received due to the inclusive and realistic scenarios that were included in the production. If the CNSM theory is applied, then universities could learn from using storytelling in their training. Retrospective storytelling will have a much more lasting impact on students versus showing them a generic and vague presentation.

Conclusion

Unfortunately, sexual violence is going to keep happening on college campuses. It is not realistic to believe that it will ever permanently go away. There are ways of targeting students more effectively though. It may not completely solve the issue but it will help the students to resonate more with the material. It could also help students feel more comfortable with coming forward about their experiences. Especially those that have experienced institutional betrayal.

The first step is acknowledging the students with disabilities and who identify as LGBTQ+ (who the system has failed) as being high risk. Universities should implement inclusive training that is relevant to real-life college experiences. Lastly, universities should

consider additional training for groups with a statistically higher chance of committing sexual violence which are men in fraternities and men on sports teams. That is not to say that only men exclusively commit sexual violence. Most sexual assaults happen at fraternity and sporting events.

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