Rich, Marc D., Lucretia Robinson, Courtney Ahrens, and Jose I. Rodriguez. "Proactive Performance to Prevent Sexual Assault: The Role of Masculinity in Violence Prevention." Intercultural Communication: A Reader (12th Edition). Ed. Larry A. Samovar , Richard E. Porter and Edwin R. McDaniel. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth P, 2008. 413-419.

Sexual assault is not just a female problem, it's a male problem, too.

(Male audience member).

Masculinity has become a relentless test by which we prove to other men, to women, and ultimately to ourselves, that we have successfully mastered the part. (Gergen and Davis, 1997, p. 240).

Ariel is in her apartment with her friends Sonia and Jeremy. Her eyes are focused on the floor, and she is clearly upset. She attempts to explain what is wrong, but her friends are engaged in an upbeat conversation and keep talking over Ariel. Finally, she musters up the strength to speak. "Last night," she begins in a soft voice, "I think K.J. forced himself on me." The mood in the room shifts dramatically and Jeremy asks, "He did what?" Jeremy is fuming now, pacing back and forth. "That's it! I'm calling up my boys right now and we're going to take care of this problem!" Ariel pleads with Jeremy not to leave the apartment, but he is already dialing his cell phone and making his way out the door.

The previous scene is part of the interACT performance on sexual assault prevention. The interACT troupe performs for approximately 2,500 audience members per year in a variety of educational and community settings throughout the United States. Using "proactive scenes", the highest level of audience involvement according to Pelias and VanOosting (1987), the goal of the interACT troupe is to reduce sexual assaults on college campuses, create empathy for women who have been assaulted, and challenge traditional male gender roles. Responding to the call from scholars to create sexual assault programs that consider the role of men in prevention, the interACT performance was designed to enroll college male students as proactive agents of change. As

Berkowitz (2005) notes, “Men must take responsibility for preventing sexual assault, because most assaults are perpetuated by men against women, children, and other men . . . Thus, effective sexual assault prevention requires that men look at their own potential for violence as well as take a stand against the violence of other men” (p. 163).

The efficacy of the interACT sexual assault prevention program has been measured by quantitative and qualitative methods, and the results have been published in books and scholarly journals (see Rodriguez and Rich, 2006; Rich and Rodriguez, 2007). In this essay, we are interested in considering how the interACT scenes illuminate traditional male gender roles, thereby enabling audience members to identify with the characters and understand the serious consequences of masculinity. Once this occurs, college men are invited on stage with the peer actor-educators to perform new gender roles that can help prevent sexual assault and provide support for women who are survivors. We base our analysis in this chapter on data collected during focus groups that convened immediately after an interACT performance. In the first section of this essay we discuss the epidemic of sexual assault on college campuses. Second, we explore ways to better understand gender and masculinity. In the third section, we consider how the interACT performance provides a safe space for reconsidering masculinity, and rehearsing new roles that may help prevent sexual assault.

Sexual Assault

The interACT program was developed in response to the high incidence of sexual assault on college campuses, which has risen to near epidemic proportions (Simon, 1993). Defined as "forced sexual aggression or contact with or without penetration against a victim" (Black et al., 2000, p. 589), sexual assaults are common on college campuses due to the convergence of factors including drug and alcohol use, age of college students, independent living, and the acceptance of rape myths and norms (Holcomb et al., 1993). In addition, college women are three times more likely to be sexually assaulted than the general population, and will be assaulted by someone they know 80-90% of the time (Yeater & O'Donahue, 1999). The impact of sexual assault and post-assault trauma has gained significant attention from contemporary researchers because, as Resick and Schnicke (1992) explained, "sexual assault is a major life-threatening, traumatic event from which many victims never fully recover" (p.4).

Although statistics on sexual assault are sometimes difficult to ascertain, in one of the most cited studies Koss, Gidycz, and Wisniewski (1987) show that 27% of college women experience rape or attempted rape, 25% of college men are involved in some form of sexual aggression, and 8% of men raped or attempted to rape a woman since the age of 14. Although much of the research on sexual assault focuses on the devastating impact that these violent acts have on women, it is also important to note that 93% of perpetrators are men (National Institute of Justice Website), and that an astounding 35% of college men polled would sexually assault a woman if they knew there was not a possibility of being caught (Yeater and O'Donahue, 1999). The need to address issues related to masculinity in prevention led one scholar to conclude, "…I am extremely skeptical of any rape prevention work that proposes solutions to the problem of rape but

leaves masculinity, as we know today, largely intact" (Capraro, 1994, p. 22). Hence, it seems clear that rape prevention programs "should focus primarily on the risks posed by male perpetrators" (National Institute of Justice Website)

The research regarding sexual assault on college campuses can surely be shocking and depressing. Coming to an understanding of the devastating impact violent acts have on women, as well as the role that masculinity plays in the perpetuation of sexual assault, can be a difficult process for college students. However, as teacher-scholar-activists interested in the relationship between culture, gender, and performance, we strongly believe that if we take steps to uncover the male gender roles that perpetuate acts of violence against women, then we can work together to prevent sexual assault and facilitate empathic responses for survivors of assault. Before describing the interACT scene and examining how it allows for new gender enactments, we will first consider the relationship between gender, culture and communication.

Understanding Gender

A burgeoning area of study in the discipline of communication studies is gender. Unlike sex, which is "determined by genetic codes that program biological features" gender is a social construction (like race) that we learn from birth (Wood and Reich, 2006, p. 178). That is, there is nothing "natural" about gender; rather, it is a learned behavior that is constructed in our interactions with others and shaped by our cultural experiences. Our gender construction begins at birth with the names we are given, clothes we are dressed in, and the ways our rooms are decorated. In addition, even how

our parents or caregivers speak to us is heavily influenced by gender and cultural norms. As Wood (2002) explains, "We are surrounded by communication that announces social images of gender and seeks to persuade us these are natural, correct ways for men and women to behave" (29).

Although gender roles might appear natural, we can probably recall a time when there were consequences for not performing our gender "correctly." Perhaps as a young boy you were critiqued for crying or told that you needed to "act like a man." Growing up as a girl you might have been scolded for not "acting like a lady", or told that certain sports or toys were not for girls. As West and Zimmerman (1991) note, " . . . to 'do' gender is not always to live up to normative conceptions of femininity or masculinity; it is to engage in behavior at the risk of gender assessment" (p. 23).

Not only do we learn about gender norms from our parents and friends, gender is also inextricably linked to culture. As Wood (2002) notes, "gender is upheld by cultural practices" (p. 29). In U.S. mainstream culture, for example, there are clear prescriptions about how men should act. For example, during a football game it is appropriate for athletes to pat one another on the butt after a good play. However, imagine if a male classmate patted another male's butt after he did well on an exam! Furthermore, there are only certain contexts—like weddings or funerals—where men are expected to cry. As illustrated, cultural norms play a significant role in masculinity.

Although gender roles may seem rigid in the U.S., Pearson and VanHorn (2004) note, "Gender does not remain static over the life span" (286). Hence, our ideas about femininity and masculinity are probably more fluid than we recognize on a day-to-day basis, leading some scholars to define gender as a performative act rather than a

biological fact (see Augusta-Scott, 2007; Butler, 1990; 1993; 2004; Halberstam, 1998). By using performance as an explanatory metaphor to consider gender, we can begin to consider the scripts (language) we use, costumes (clothing) we wear, and the scenes (daily interactions) we participate in that are gendered. As Bornstein (1998) explains, "Gender is interactive and relatively predictable between ourselves and another person. We know what gender to perform when relating to any given person" (p. 178). If we accept the notion that gender is not a biological fact, but rather a performative act reinforced by family, friends and culture, we can consider the possibility that there exists alternative ways to enact gender in less rigid and more humane ways. Hence, we can begin to envision new performances of masculinity that are supportive of women and can potentially prevent sexual assault. Moreover, programs geared toward men are critical because "they are virtually always the rape perpetrator" (Rozee and Koss, 2001, p. 295). It is our belief that the interACT model provides a safe space for male college students to rehearse new gender roles.

The InterACT Scene

The interACT scene begins with three male college students, K.J., JaCarri and Paul, drinking and sharing stories about their night out. We portray alcohol consumption in the first scene because "the more intoxicated a man is, the greater the likelihood that he will ignore a woman's protests or be unable to interpret her words or actions as she intended them" (Bohmer and Parrot, 1993, p. 19-20). In this scene, the men are highly energetic, and discuss the "girls" they met and phone numbers they collected. The men

objectify the women, referring to the way they looked and the "skimpy" clothing that was worn. The scene quickly escalates when JaCarri notes that K.J.'s girlfriend is still out at a bar with her friends, and is probably drunk and fooling around with another guy. Paul tries to intervene, but he is shut down when JaCarri threatens him with violence, illustrating the view that " . . . in some situations speech is appropriate in male role enactment, but in others it is not and its use casts doubt on the speaker's manliness" (Philipsen, 1975, p. 14). By the end of the scene, K.J. is in a frenzy, and ultimately explodes when his girlfriend (Ariel) comes home. The first scene ends when K.J. demands that his friends leave, and proceeds to make Ariel "sit down and shut up!" K.J. engages in a tirade, accusing Ariel of making him "look like a punk" in front of his friends. The scene ends when K.J. grabs Ariel's arm and yells, "This will never happen again!"

In the second scene, Ariel tries to explain to her friends, Sonia and Kelly, that something is wrong. We include this scene because only 3.2 percent of female college students report being raped to police or campus security, but "two-thirds of rape victims disclosed their experience to a friend" (Brown, 2005, p. 5). After Ariel states, "I think K.J. forced himself on me last night," Sonia blames her for treating K.J. poorly, drinking too much, and creating drama. Kelly is traumatized by Ariel's disclosure, and goes into a passionate monologue about calling the police and taking Ariel to the hospital before "all the evidence is lost." Ariel is unable to speak because her friends are not listening to her.

After these brief initial scenes (approximately ten minutes total), the remainder of the show consists of four proactive scenes that involve audience members. During the first scene, 8-10 audience members come on stage and embody the negative voices that

go through a woman's head after she has been assaulted. For example, an audience member creates a frozen pose of pointing at Ariel, and then states in a demeaning voice, "You should have never gone out drinking with your friends." This first scene enables audience members to better understand how a woman might feel after surviving sexual assault. During the second proactive scene, we reenact the situation between the three men in the apartment. However, this time audience members can replace Paul and try to intervene with K.J. (the boyfriend) and JaCarri (the aggressive friend). During the third proactive scene, we recreate the situation between the three women, providing audience members with an opportunity to replace Ariel (the girlfriend) and try to get less antagonistic responses from her friends (Sonia and Kelly). During the final proactive scene Ariel comes back on stage and two audience members enact the roles of supportive friends.

Reconstructing Gender

In their discussion of teaching gender and communication classes, Cooks and Sun (2002) note, "When students are challenged to actively seek out and perform alternatives to the binaries of male and female, they often actively resist" (p. 293). The process of questioning what we may see as traditional gender roles and examining how these roles are socially constructed can be a painful process for students. There may be additional resistance when an "expert" such as a Professor presents information about gender to students who are perhaps being exposed to the literature for the first time. In the interACT scene, however, student actor-educators reenact scenes that are perceived as

realistic by college students. Hence, the performances of traditional gender roles are consistent with what audience members can expect in similar situations. What starts out as a fun time between male friends quickly escalates to a violent scenario when performances of hypermasculinity are mixed with alcohol.

By creating a scene that reflects a typical night out, male audience members are able to see themselves in the characters on stage. The following comments from male students illustrate their identification with the interACT scenes:

> The performance was more tangible than a lecture, it was real, you could see the actual emotions
>
> That happens in real life.
>
> I was emotionally attached to the situation because it was so real . . . it could happen to me one day, it could happen to anyone in here.
>
> It was realistic for us, for college students, 'cause we're dealing with the same issues, out drinking with friends, the girlfriend out with her girlfriends.

Once male audience members are able to see how the scene on stage is similar to what happens in their own lives, they can become aware of the consequences of acting in traditional masculine ways. The following feedback from male audience members shows their willingness to critically assess performances of masculinity:

> How easily this guy [the boyfriend] went from having fun to being a rapist. How easily things can lead to abuse. How easily it could get out of hand.
>
> . . . everything could be fun and then one second later, poof. I thought it was a real eye opener.
>
> You can see the build up, with the anger. I was like, aw baby, he's getting angry, he's getting angry . . . all of it's gonna happen [because] his anger is rising.
>
> Stuff like that happens a lot with my friends. We all have girlfriends and we are always teasing. Everyone is using it to cover up, to cover up for being whipped.

> It's like conversations people have, but you know, in that context, it just looks disgusting . . .

Once the men in the audience identify with the characters on stage, and recognize the pitfalls of performing masculinity in problematic ways, they are invited on stage to replace Paul's character (the third male friend) and try to intervene to prevent the sexual assault from happening in the first place. As Wood (2002) explains, "Concrete embodiments of alternatives to conventional [gender] roles create new possibilities for our own lives" (p. 25). This scene is a critical and unique aspect of the interACT program because men are enrolled as prosocial agents of change, rather than simply being blamed for women's oppression. In the following passages male students reflect on their own interventions, as well as the interventions they saw enacted by their peers on stage. They also consider additional strategies to deescalate a violent situation:

> The performance would help you resolve a situation or be able to step in if you see a friend getting emotionally charged over another person's comments, you could step in and pull him to the side and stop the situation from happening.
>
> If you were in a situation where it was getting real bad between two guys . . . I would try to break it up with comedy . . . but then I never would of thought [before viewing the performance] to just stay there, like you can easily lie and be like, dude, I'm too drunk to drive.
>
> I wanted to go up there and say. This is it! This is exactly it! What not to do . . . Stop! I wanted to yell.
>
> You can't let yourself become unglued . . .the guy's obviously in a very violent stage. He can be talked to, take him outside, he can be calmed down.

During the second scene in the show, when Ariel is speaking to her two female friends about the assault, the facilitator pauses the performance and asks the audience if they want to see the male version of Kelly (Ariel's friend who overreacts and demands that they go to the hospital). By bringing in a male friend we are able to demonstrate what

we perceive to be realistic and heightened performances of masculinity. This scene, which is discussed in the opening of this chapter, shows how a man may quickly move to a state of violence when he believes a close friend has been sexually assaulted. The move to violence may be the first reaction a man experiences because it is a (stereo)typical masculine response, and because men may not have other less gendered communication strategies at their disposal. Men may also believe that they are actually meeting a woman's needs by physically assaulting the perpetrator. However, after the facilitator asks for feedback, audience members consistently note that both Kelly and Jeremy are doing what they believe is best for the survivor, without actually asking Ariel what she needs. This short scene typically generates a great deal of laughter, and the audience members usually agree that this is how men would respond in a similar situation. As male audience members explain:

> That's true, that's how guys react. The first thing, let's go find him, first thing is protecting my homegirl.
>
> If a woman came up to me and told me she got raped, I would do exactly what the guy in the show did, that's the only thing I would think of before the show . . . but I never would have thought that it was for me, it's like this is for her, we're gonna kick this guy's ass, she's gonna be so happy.

Once the audience comes to the realization that physically assaulting K.J. would not alleviate the situation, the facilitator asks the audience what they believe Ariel really needs from her friends. Audience members typically respond that Ariel needs support and someone to listen to her. Then, the facilitator invites two audience members to come on stage and take on the roles of empathic friends because, according to Warshaw (1988), "The reactions of the people around her and the support she receives soon after the assault may be critical to the woman's survival and recovery" (p. 181). During the

scene, however, Ariel is extremely confused about what happened, wonders if she did something to provoke the attack, and makes it very difficult for the friends to deliver their supportive messages. By coming on stage in the roll of a supportive friend, rather than a male who blames the victim or seeks to “fix the problem” by assaulting K.J., audience members come to understand that there are a variety of possible communication strategies available to men beyond the knee-jerk reactions that seem “natural” in our culture. The following statements illustrate that men are willing and able to learn new performances of masculinity:

> You gotta listen to them . . . without wanting to solve the problem. Just listen to them.
>
> . . . if she told you she is telling you for a reason, because she wants you probably there for her and not to run off and go hunt down this guy.
>
> Before the performance I would have asked a lot of questions . . .What started it? Why didn’t you stop it? I think now I would . . . ask her what her needs are and let her know I’m here just to listen to her.
>
> After seeing different approaches to the scene it makes you kinda realize that they need you to be supportive instead of being critical and you know they need you to be more of a friend.
>
> You learn it’s not easy to just sit down and listen to someone.

Conclusions

In their essay on gender and teaching, Cooks and Sun (2002) ask, “For those critical of the pedagogy of mainstream gender research, who wish to teach outside the confining rhetoric of differences and categories, what are the possibilities? (p. 307). Our experience with the interACT performance lead us to believe that proactive performance provides an experiential opportunity for college men to reflect on problematic aspects of

traditional gender roles. Subsequently, men learn to rehearse new performances of masculinity that are both less violent and more sensitive to the needs of women who have survived sexual assault. Male gender norms can be "exposed as nonnatural and nonnecessary when they take place in a context and through a form of embodying that defies normative expectation" (Butler, 2004, p. 218). We believe that the interACT performance provides precisely the type of context that Butler is suggesting. We conclude this chapter with the words of a male audience member who underscores the importance of the interACT scenes: "You gotta remember. That victim could be your sister. That victim could be your mom. You never know. As long as this program teaches one guy, it's working."

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