

# Using Epistemic Injustice to Examine Scholarship About Sexual Violence Among Students With Minoritized Identities

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## Abstract

We engaged in a content analysis of 10 years of scholarship about students of color, students with disabilities, and queer and/or trans students and sexual violence (SV). Our findings indicate that most of the scholarship centering students with minoritized identities focuses on prevalence and risk factors associated with SV and lacks theoretical frameworks relevant to the populations being studied. Employing epistemic injustice as a framework, we argue the implications of excluding students with minoritized identities in the scholarship about SV results in ineffective research and practice, which ultimately results in continued high rates of SV for all students.

## Keywords

sexual violence, sexual assault, college students, epistemic injustice

Researchers examining sexual violence (SV) among college students face a conundrum when considering the role of power and identity in their work. Specifically, researchers have begun to acknowledge increased rates of violence directed toward people with minoritized identities. Queer and trans people, people with disabilities, women of color (Cantor et al., 2019), and people with varied combinations of these identities (Porter & McQuiller Williams, 2011) experience high rates of violence. However, the vast majority of research about SV among college students centers on

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cisgender, heterosexual, White women and fails to engage in analysis based on identity beyond that of being “female” (Harris et al., 2020; Linder et al., 2020), making it difficult to understand the dynamics of violence directed toward people with minoritized identities. The vast majority of scholarship about SV continues to use the binary “male” and “female” to refer to gender, not sex (Linder et al., 2020). While we do not agree with this use of binary sex to describe the complexity of gender identities, when the authors of previous studies use “female,” so do we in an attempt to point out how common this practice still is.

Further, virtually no scholarship employs a theoretical framework centering on power to examine SV among college students (Linder et al., 2020). To illustrate the challenges in the scholarship about SV, we engaged in a content analysis of the literature about students of color (SOCs), students with disabilities (SWDs), and queer and/or trans students (Q/T students) and SV. Employing epistemic injustice (EI) as a framework, we argue that the implications of excluding or ignoring students with minoritized identities in the scholarship about SV results in ineffective research and practice, which ultimately results in continued high rates of SV for all students. To set a context for this study, we synthesize the literature about the prevalence of violence directed toward college students with minoritized identities and summarize recommendations from scholars calling for more intersectional, power-conscious research on SV among college students.

### *Prevalence Scholarship*

The scholarship identifying the prevalence of SV among college students is rife with challenges (Krause et al., 2018; Wood et al., 2017). Specifically, many prevalence studies are conducted on single campuses with convenience samples (Wood et al., 2017), fail to meaningfully engage or disaggregate data based on identity (Linder et al., 2020), and rely on outdated or inconsistent terminology to ask students about their experiences with SV (Krause et al., 2018). Additionally, most studies still use binary sex categories “male” and “female” to examine gender (even though these terms refer to sex and not gender; Schrag, 2017). Historically, Koss et al. (1987) led the way in asking students about behaviors, rather than labels, associated with SV to better assess rates of victimization and perpetration, but not all surveys have modeled this practice. More recently, some researchers have begun to ask complex, nuanced questions about students’ identities (e.g., separating gender identity from sexual orientation, allowing students to select more than one race). For example, the Association of American Universities’ (AAU) study on campus sexual assault allows students to identify a range of gender identities, and the researchers who analyze the study work to engage in thoughtful disaggregation of the data based on gender identity (Cantor et al., 2019).

The AAU’s biannual survey on campus sexual assault provides a comprehensive picture of the problem of SV among college students in the U.S. Authors of the research reports disaggregate the data based on complex identities throughout the study, ask about behaviors, rather than labels, and survey students at 33 colleges

and universities. The AAU study provides a better overview of the prevalence of SV among different groups of students than most other studies as the sample size is large and the survey allows for complex identity categories in ways that other surveys do not. The most recent report from the AAU study indicates that SWDs, SOCs, and gender-nonconforming SOCs experience exceptionally high rates of dating violence and sexual assault (Cantor et al., 2019).

### *Calls for Critical Scholarship*

Scholars have begun to call for more intentional research centering students with minoritized identities and SV by highlighting the scarcity of power analysis in research, lack of diversity of participants, and limited methodological strategies as significant problems in the existing literature (Harris et al., 2020; Klein et al., 2021; Linder et al., 2020; Linder & Grimes, 2023). While many researchers collect demographic information about their participants, few use this information to conduct meaningful analyses about identity and SV (Linder et al., 2020). Psychologists and sociologists publish most scholarship about SV among college students, and the topics covered in scholarship about SV tend to “mutually construct” themselves (Harris et al., 2020, p. 27), and heavily focus on (“female”) victimization risk factors, support for victims, and alcohol’s role in sexual assault (Linder et al., 2020). Although some scholars have begun to examine SV from more critical perspectives and paradigms (e.g., Grimes, 2021; Harris, 2020; Harris et al., 2021; Karunaratne, 2023b; Zounlome et al., 2019; Zounlome et al., 2021), and the number of studies centering students with minoritized identities has increased in the past several years (e.g., Coulter et al., 2017; McMahan et al., 2020; Pittman et al., 2022), our study indicates that the dominant approach to the scholarship on SV work still relies on post-positivist paradigms and using binary language to examine SV among college students with minoritized identities.

Klein et al. (2021, p. 6) call for researchers to engage in research about students with minoritized identities and include several specific recommendations, including using an intersectional approach and social justice paradigm, examining prevalence statistics in relationship to oppression, establishing “collaborative spaces for researchers, practitioners, and activists to talk about system-level risk factors,” and disseminating findings in accessible ways. Similarly, Linder and Grimes (2023) edited a special issue of the *Journal of Women and Gender in Higher Education* calling for more critical scholarship related to addressing SV among college students. In particular, authors call for more critical frameworks to center students with minoritized identities (Karunaratne, 2023b; Woods, 2023) and to better understand the relationship between oppression and SV (Anderson Wadley & Hurtado, 2023; Shepp et al., 2023). Karunaratne (2023b) calls on researchers to consider approaching research with healing methodologies in mind, especially for students with minoritized identities. Defined as “moving toward wholeness,” healing may result from effective research that centers on the human, rather than the outcome (Karunaratne, 2023b, p. 41). Postpositivist paradigms, which dominate the literature on SV among college students, discourage engaging

deeply with participants, resulting in research focused more on the outcome than the process, which likely hurts survivors.

Through this study, we seek to begin to answer these calls by contributing to the foundation of scholarship highlighting the nature of scholarship about students with minoritized identities and SV. We conducted a content analysis (White & Marsh, 2006) of the literature about students with minoritized identities and SV to synthesize the findings and note the methodological challenges of current scholarship. We discuss the findings through a framework of EI. To be clear, this study is not a systematic review or meta-analysis attempting to synthesize the findings of these studies; instead, we focus on the ways in which the research was conducted, including the methodologies and theoretical frameworks employed, topics examined, and participants centered. Our analysis allows us to make recommendations about improving the process of doing scholarship based on previous calls for more critical research about SV.

## Theoretical Framework

Epistemic injustice (EI) describes the ways that knowledge constructed using inequitable practices results in incomplete and inaccurate information. Specifically, scholars of EI contend that when entire groups of people are excluded from knowledge construction processes, our collective inability to address social injustices suffers (Frank, 2013; Fricker, 2007). The research on SV presents a prime example of our failure to effectively address SV, in part because of EI. Researchers play a significant role by consistently ignoring and misrepresenting people of color, queer and trans people, and people with disabilities, among others, in research about SV. Researchers engage in testimonial and hermeneutical injustice (Fricker, 2007), as well as contributory injustice (Dotson, 2012) as it relates to research.

Testimonial injustice refers to the idea that people purposely ignore specific populations of people, frequently because they perceive certain people as unable to be “knowers,” and doubt their intellectual abilities (Fricker, 2007). Testimonial injustice is rooted in individual-level practices where people with power deem some knowers as “uncredible” and therefore unable to contribute to knowledge construction. In the case of research, this may happen on the part of the researcher by choosing to ignore particular populations of people who may have knowledge about a topic or phenomenon. Testimonial injustice may also happen at the level of an audience intentionally ignoring specific researchers (e.g., women of color, people with disabilities) because the audience members may believe that the researcher does not possess the credibility to “know” something, despite the researcher engaging in rigorous research (Dotson, 2012).

Hermeneutic injustice refers to structural mechanisms of discrimination, highlighting the ways that some people’s experiences are “obscured from collective understanding” as a result of systematic issues related to knowing (Fricker, 2007). Specifically, hermeneutic injustice occurs when an “asymmetrical ability of some groups to affect the ways in which a given society makes sense of the world” (Dotson, 2012, p. 29). In particular, when a group of people hold the power to determine the accepted

processes for creating and sharing knowledge, hermeneutic injustice occurs. Journal publication processes illustrate the problems of hermeneutic injustice in the process of knowledge construction (Frank, 2013). When researchers must rely on previously published literature and methods to be published, new ways of thinking or constructing knowledge never emerge in traditional scholarship (Frank, 2013).

Scholars have expanded Fricker's conceptualization of EI by highlighting the idea of willful ignorance on the part of the listener or reader (Dotson, 2012; Poulhaus, 2012). Willful hermeneutic ignorance occurs when "dominantly situated knowers refuse to acknowledge epistemic tools developed from the experienced world of those situated marginally" (Poulhaus, 2012, p. 715). Building on the concept of willful hermeneutic injustice, Dotson (2012) argues that contributory injustice illustrates the interaction between individual-level (testimonial) and system-level (hermeneutical) injustice by illustrating that a person can use their power and positionality to engage in willful ignorance or refuse to learn or accept new or different ways of knowing. Willful hermeneutical injustice or contributory injustice in research occurs when researchers continue to rely on outdated instruments or instruments developed based on dominant groups' experiences to engage in research about people with minoritized identities, or when people with dominant identities refuse to consider research methodologies developed by and for people with minoritized identities.

## Methodology and Methods

To better understand the scholarship about SV among students with minoritized identities, we conducted a content analysis of 10 years of literature (White & Marsh, 2006). Specifically, we sought to understand the methodologies and theoretical frameworks employed by scholars, topics studied, and populations centered in the scholarship. Our intention is to present an overview of the scholarship to provide researchers with a holistic picture of the scholarship so that we can work together to address some of the challenges in the research and to engage in more rigorous, critical research.

### *Researcher Positionality*

Members of the research team included two undergraduate students, three doctoral students, and one faculty member. Chris, a faculty member, recruited student researchers through a research apprenticeship course; students received course credit for engaging in the research project. Three of the five student researchers are authors of this article. We all journaled throughout the process about our relationship to the topic, including the assumptions that we found ourselves making, and highlighted our positionalities and relationship to the research here. Chris, a queer, White cisgender woman has worked for over 20 years in higher education as both a researcher and practitioner as it relates to issues of SV among college students. In this project, Chris wrestled with understanding the *why* behind researchers' decisions about identity in research (i.e., pushback from reviewers, researcher socialization), and her own contributions to the "power-neutral" approaches to scholarship on SV. Cydney identifies as a queer

Chicana/mestiza with distinct cultural and familial values that she feels are rooted in her upbringing in the southern Bay Area of California. In participating in this project, Cydney had specific struggles with the deficit framing that researchers approached queer subjects as their victimization was often traced to their subjugation as queer people. Quentin identifies as a gay man of color. As such, he was interested in how SV is represented in the lives of queer and trans students. What he didn't know was that so much of the scholarship would center around the stress of being a sexual minority while not offering solutions centered on the student experience. Allie identifies as a queer, White, cisgender woman who has spent the last two years participating in violence prevention work. One of her biggest struggles in this project was tackling research that focused on victimization risk factors related to disability instead of why people disproportionately cause harm to disabled people. Members of the research team also identify as people with disabilities, yet for privacy reasons chose not to disclose or discuss that experience here.

### Research Process

The research team met throughout the spring 2022 semester. We started by reading scholarship about EI and previous content analyses of scholarship on SV among college students. Student researchers then paired up and chose a specific population of students with minoritized identities to focus on in a search of several databases. We used a standardized search process for each population centered to ensure consistency across pairs and worked with a librarian to assist us in identifying terms. The specific databases and search terms we used are included in Appendix A.

Using these search terms yielded a significant number of articles in each category. For disability, the terms yielded 134 articles; for queer and trans students, 608 articles, and for SOCs, 203 articles. We removed articles that did not focus on the United States or college students. As we began analysis, we also noted that a fair number of articles in each section either did not *focus on* or *center* the identity, but simply mentioned "race" or "sexual orientation." We removed those articles from further analysis. Each article that was removed from the analysis was reviewed by one student researcher and the lead researcher. If there was a discrepancy, we asked for a third member of the research team to review the article and make a recommendation. Some articles centered on two or more identities (i.e., race and sexual orientation); in these cases, both research pairs read and annotated the article, so some articles were included in more than one section. The final number of articles coded in each section is described below.

Each research pair then divided the articles to read and used a common spreadsheet to code each article. We coded for methodology, theoretical framework employed, topic, population centered, and key findings (example codebook included in Appendix B). We coded the methodologies for conceptual or empirical research, and then among the empirical research, we coded for quantitative, qualitative, mixed methods, or discourse/content analysis. We read each abstract to determine if the authors employed a theoretical framework that explicitly focused on addressing oppression or specifically designed to better understand the experiences of the

population being studied. When coding for topics, we noted one primary topic examined by the researchers in the study. Finally, for the populations centered, we paid attention to gender in each category, and we also noted where we observed themes or trends based on population centered as highlighted below. Some additional relevant criteria were added to each section as described below. For example, in the section on queer and trans students, we coded for whether the researchers engaged in a separate analysis of gender identity and sexual orientation or if they combined those identities. Each article was coded by one student member of the research team, and then reviewed by the PI, ensuring that each piece was coded twice.

We kept researcher journals and met every other week during the coding process to discuss common challenges and to ensure consistency in our coding processes. When discrepancies occurred in our discussions, we worked to come to a consensus about moving forward. For example, in the articles about disability and SV, many of the articles focused on disability as an *outcome* of SV, rather than centering SWD in the examination of SV. As a research team, we agreed to remove those articles from the analysis as they did not meet our criteria of *centering* or *focusing on* SWDs. In the following sections, we detail our findings about SWDs, queer and trans students, and SOCs in the literature about SV among college students.

## Findings

In this section, we describe the findings of our content analysis in each section by highlighting the methodologies and theoretical frameworks employed, topics examined, and populations centered in the research.

### *Students With Disabilities*

Our initial search about SWDs resulted in 134 articles; after removing articles that did not fit our inclusion criteria, we analyzed 26 articles in this section. Of note in this section is that the vast majority of articles ( $n = 87$ ) that came up in the initial search examined disability as an outcome of SV, often focusing on the association of posttraumatic stress disorder or other mental and emotional health diagnoses as an outcome of assault. An example illustrating this includes, “The current study integrates trauma perspectives and a symbolic interactionist approach to demonstrate how identity disruption and the violation of cultural meanings for identities leads to posttraumatic stress” (Boyle, 2017, p. 69). Additionally, one article focused on non-disabled students’ perceptions of people with disabilities (Dalton et al., 2022). We chose to remove these articles from the analysis as our intention in this study is to better understand the scholarship that starts from a place of understanding the experiences of students who identified as a person with a disability, not necessarily students whom researchers identified as disabled through a diagnostic questionnaire.

*Methodology and theoretical frameworks.* Of the 26 articles centering SWD and SV, one article highlighted a study employing content analysis as the methodology; six

employed qualitative methods, and 19 employed quantitative research. We identified three articles that employed a framework or an instrument specific to abuse among people with disabilities, including the abuse assessment screen-disability (Bonomi et al., 2018; Findley et al., 2016; Roskin-Fraze, 2020). None of the other articles employed a theoretical framework or instrument centering disability as related to SV; rather, the researchers simply asked students about their experiences with SV using standard instruments and disaggregated based on ability status. The most common example of this is that researchers frequently used data collected through the American College Health Association's National College Health Assessment (NCHA), and then disaggregated the data based on ability status (Campe, 2021; Scherer et al., 2016). As noted by Campe (2021), though, the NCHA survey uses a "vague explanation of sexual assault" (p. NP 7993), which is a severe limitation of the survey.

*Topic examined.* We also coded the articles for the primary topic on which the researchers focused their inquiry. Consistent throughout this study, most articles ( $n = 14$ ; 54%) in this section focused on the prevalence and characteristics of SV among SWD. Table 1 highlights the distribution of topics examined in the section about disability and sexual violence. Articles examining prevalence usually compared SWD with students without disabilities and often included discussions about risk factors or types of assault experienced. For example, researchers examined risk factors like alcohol use, drug use, and involvement in Greek life (Campe, 2021) and categorized assaults into types, including physical, sexual, and emotional (Rothman et al., 2023). In this section, we identified 13 articles (50% of total articles) that directly compared SWD to those without disabilities. As noted in the previous section about methodology, very few of these studies employed a theoretical framework helping the readers to make sense of the findings through a disability lens.

*Populations centered.* We coded the articles in this section based on the specific population centered in the scholarship. Table 2 illustrates the populations centered in the research. Of the 26 articles we examined, most of the researchers focused on "SWDs" as a general population. Further, articles included mixed-gender participants (16) and women only (9); no articles focused explicitly on men. The policy analysis article did not include participants, which is why this total is 25 instead of 26 articles.

### *Queer and Trans Students*

In this section, we use the language "queer and/or trans students" (Q/T students) as our umbrella term. The terminology surrounding gender identity and sexual orientation is complex and nuanced. In fact, gender identity and sexual orientation are two distinct, yet interrelated, identities. That said, because most scholarship conflates or examines gender identity and sexual orientation together, we also combined these identities in our initial analysis, then disaggregated after we collected all of the articles.

Our original search yielded 608 articles. Removing articles that did not meet our criteria resulted in 93 articles for analysis. We encountered the highest number of extraneous articles in this section of the research. Likely because search terms about sexual

**Table 1.** Methodologies and Topics.

Methodology	Students with disabilities (n = 26)		Q/T students (n = 93)		Students of color (n = 72)	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
	Quantitative	19	43	59.7	73.0	71
Qualitative	6	16	22.2	23.0	11	11.8
Mixed	1	5	7.0	1.0	4	4.3
Content/discourse analysis	0	5	7.0	0.0	3	3.2
Conceptual	0	3	4.1	0.0	4	4.3
Prevalence + characteristics	14	9	12.5	54.0	23	24.7
Victim risk factors	4	11	15.2	5.0	16	17.2
Disclosure/labeling/help-seeking behaviors	2	8	11.1	7.0	11	11.8
Perceptions of SV	2	14	19.4	7.0	8	8.6
Perpetration	1	0	0.0	3.8	1	1.0
Education + awareness programming	1	3	4.1	3.8	3	3.2
Outcomes/impacts of SV	1	7	9.7	3.8	6	6.4
Policy	1	0	0.0	3.8	1	1.0
Bystander intervention	0	7	9.7	0.0	5	5.3
Research processes	0	5	6.9	0.0	6	6.4
Consent/sexual scripts	0	0	0.0	0.0	5	5.3
Campus climate	0	0	0.0	0.0	4	4.3
Campus response	0	0	0.0	0.0	2	2.1
Oppression in SV work	0	6	8.3	0.0	0	0.0
Healing	0	2	2.7	0.0	0	0.0

Note. SV = sexual violence.

**Table 2.** SWD Populations Centered.

Population	No.	%
General disability	12	46.0
Deaf students	8	30.0
Mental health	3	11.5
Minoritized students	2	7.6
Autistic students	1	3.8

Note. SWD = students with disabilities.

violence are linguistically close to search terms about sexual orientation, our search process resulted in a high number of articles that included a word that a search engine might identify as related to sexual orientation or gender identity but was not. The majority of articles that came up in the search but did not meet our inclusion criteria did not center Q/T students ( $n = 339$ ). The researchers may have mentioned Q/T students, but they did not center them in their inquiry or analysis. The other articles were excluded because they were not about sexual violence, did not take place in the United States, or did not focus on college student populations. Similar to the other sections of this analysis, we focused on methodologies and theoretical frameworks employed, topics examined, and populations centered in the inquiries.

*Methodologies and theoretical frameworks employed.* Of the 93 articles analyzed in this section, researchers primarily relied on quantitative methods ( $n = 71$ ; 76.3%). See Table 1 for an overview of the methodologies employed. We also coded the empirical articles in this section for whether researchers employed a theoretical framework specific to Q/T students or issues of power and oppression in their findings. We identified 26 articles (36.6%) that employed a theoretical framework specific to Q/T students. The most commonly used theoretical framework was the minority stress framework “which considers the impact that socially marginalized groups experience from stress and stigma due to a minority status” (Ollen et al., 2016, p. 113).

*Topics examined.* Among the 93 articles analyzed, the majority focused on the prevalence of SV among Q/T students and victimization risk factors for SV. See Table 1 for a summary of the additional topics examined. Very little scholarship focuses on the perpetration of SV; in this study, two articles focused on perpetration and victimization risk factors together (Taylor & Neppl, 2020; Zavala, 2017) and one article explicitly focused perpetration of SV among Q/T students (Edwards & Sylaska, 2016).

*Populations centered.* As discussed above, the populations centered in the research about Q/T students’ experience with SV vary dramatically, and researchers employ different languages to identify similar groups of students. In our analysis, we noted that 16 articles (17.2%) conflated gender identity and sexual orientation in their analysis, using

**Table 3.** Q/T Student Populations Centered/Terms Used by Researchers.

Population	No.	%
Sexual minority	31	36.0
LGB, no T	18	20.9
LGBTQ+	14	16.2
Sexual identity/orientation	5	5.8
Lesbian/bisexual women	4	4.6
Same-sex partners	3	3.4
Minoritized students	3	3.4
Gay men	3	3.4
Trans* students	2	2.3
Nonbinary	1	1.1
Queer	1	1.1
Gender of their partners	1	1.1

terms like LGBTQ+ without distinguishing between gender identity and sexual orientation in the analysis. Unfortunately, some researchers take this a step further and exclude transgender participants as illustrated here, “Participants who endorse a gender identity other than male or female ( $n = 15$ ) were excluded due to small cell size” (Smidt et al., 2021, p. 44). We summarize the terms utilized by researchers in Table 3. The most common term utilized by researchers to describe sexual orientation was *sexual minority* (31; 36%); closely following was a combination of LGB without the T: 18 articles (20.8%) focused on sexual orientation by using a term like LGB, which was a combination of sexual orientations, but intentionally did not include or conflate gender identity.

In addition to these complex labels related to gender identity and sexual orientation, we also coded the articles for gender, noting whether the researchers focused on a particular gender in their work. Articles included mixed-gender participants (71), men (3), women (2), and transgender students (1). Of note is that several articles in the section centering Q/T students in the scholarship still defaulted to a male/female binary in the analysis of their research.

### *Students of Color*

The initial search related to SOCs and SV resulted in 203 articles; 72 articles met the inclusion criteria for our study. Similar to the section on Q/T students, we removed a number of articles from the analysis because they mention “race” but do not explicitly center SOC in their work. Additionally, some articles in the initial search focused on SOC and health, but not SV. Among the 72 articles in the analysis, seven articles explicitly examined (primarily White) students’ perceptions of SV based on the race of the perpetrator and victim in sexual assault scenarios. While each of these articles employed a racial analysis in that they specifically highlighted previous scholarship points to racism influencing people’s perceptions of culpability and worthy victimhood in sexual assault

scenarios, we chose to exclude them from our analysis and instead focused on the empirical articles that intentionally sought to focus on SOC in their work.

*Methodologies and theoretical frameworks employed.* Researchers employed a number of methodologies in the scholarship about SOCs and SV, as highlighted in Table 1. While the research in this category still heavily relied on quantitative methods ( $n = 43$ ; 59.7%), more researchers employed qualitative methods than in other sections of this study. We also sought to understand if scholars attempted to understand their research question through a race-neutral lens or if they employed a critical or culturally responsive theoretical framework to help them make sense of their data. We noted 18 abstracts (25%) explicitly named a framework that helped the researcher examine the data with attention to racism or racialized experiences. For example, one article highlighted the importance of “sociocultural contexts” in their bystander intervention program focused on “the African American community” (McKendrick, 2020, p. 276). Another study specifically highlighted the use of “the decolonial Par/Des (i) framework along with culturally situated methods” (Karunaratne, 2023a, p. 131) to explore healing.

The remaining empirical articles focused on disaggregating the data based on race, but not employing critical theoretical frameworks to help make sense of the data. For example, one study states, “Given the popularity of bystander intervention programming, it is important to know if variables like gender, race, or year in college impact intervention attitudes/behaviors or interact with perceived peer norms” (Brown et al., 2014, p. 350). Further, another study employs “special attention to” various demographics, including race and ethnicity (Worthen & Wallace, 2021, p. NP2640). Finally, many studies employ race-neutral frameworks to guide their studies, as highlighted here, “Asian American and White American trauma-exposed college women completed a survey on sexual trauma history, posttraumatic cognitions, somatic symptoms, and PTSD severity” (Koo et al., 2014, p. 337). However, these frameworks are not race-neutral as they were developed on samples of predominantly White and straight women (Harris, 2020; Wooten, 2017).

*Topics examined.* Among the 72 articles, researchers examined a variety of topics, more equally distributed than in previous sections. See Table 1 for an overview of topics examined.

*Populations centered.* We noted three distinct ways that scholars attempted to focus on SOCs in SV research: *designed* to focus on SOC ( $n = 34$ ; 53.1%), *analysis* of a larger data set ( $n = 18$ ; 28.1%), and *comparison* to White students ( $n = 11$ ; 17.1%). The researchers who set out to specifically focus on SOCs in their work intentionally designed their study and recruited participants with a particular identity in mind. An example of a study that was designed to focus on SOCs included the following, “This explanatory study examined Hmong college students’ experience, awareness, and appropriate response to domestic violence in the Hmong community” (Takahashi & Lee, 2018, p. 156). Studies where researchers engaged in intentional analysis based

**Table 4.** Students of color (SOC) Populations Centered.

Race	Women		Men		Mixed		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
American Indian	0	0.0	0	0.0	2	3.1	2	3.1
Asian American/API	6	9.4	1	1.6	0	0.0	7	11
Black/African American (not at HBCU)	6	9.4	2	3.1	3	4.7	11	17.2
HBCU focus	6	9.4	0	0.0	1	1.6	7	11
Hispanic/Latinx	4	6.3	3	4.7	6	9.4	13	20.3
Hmong	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	1.6	1	1.6
Students with minoritized identities	0	0.0	0	0.0	8	12.5	8	12.5
South Asian	1	1.6	0	0.0	1	1.6	2	3.1
SOC	7	11	1	1.6	5	7.8	13	20.3

on race included examples like this one, “the purpose of this study is to examine whether and how students’ racial identity (White, non-Hispanic, African American, Asian American, Hispanic, and multiracial) is associated with their reported intervention opportunities and prosocial response as bystanders to sexual violence risks” (Hoxmeier et al., 2021, p. 4668). Finally, examples of intentional comparison to white students are encapsulated in the following description, “this study examined campus safety experiences of Black/African American in comparison to White undergraduate students and how these relate to psychological distress” (Maffini & Dillard, 2022, p. 2).

Other researchers did not necessarily design the study or recruit participants with a particular identity in mind but did intentionally engage in analysis based on race. A common representation of this strategy included, “This exploratory investigation examines the influence of race, gender, and prior sexual victimization on attitudes and behaviors related to date rape from a large sample of college students ( $n = 3,084$ ) in the United States” (Williams et al., 2016, p. 173). Finally, some researchers sought to focus on a particular group of SOCs in their work and intentionally compared these students’ experiences to those of white students, which we coded separately because it was such a large portion of the data. A representation of the intentional comparison category includes, “The current study examined the rape scripts of African American ( $n = 72$ ) and European American ( $n = 99$ ) college women” (Littleton & Dodd, 2016, p. 1725).

In this section, we also attempted to document the specific populations centered by the researchers. We used the authors’ language to organize our analysis, including categorization by race and gender, as highlighted in Table 4.

As noted here, a substantial body of research that centers SOC takes place at historically black colleges and universities, which we intentionally highlighted in the table above.

## Discussion

We explored the ways researchers explicitly centered or focused on SOCs, Q/T students, and SWDs and SV so that we could draw attention to the varied ways research is conducted about oppression and sexual violence among college students. Using a

lens of EI, we highlight the ways current research practices, even when focused on or centering students with minoritized identities, often continue to reify traditional scholarly practices, resulting in ineffective research and practice to end SV among college students. We highlight ways EI informs our understanding of the scholarship on students with minoritized identities and SV and provide recommendations for future scholarship centering students with minoritized identities.

### *Testimonial Injustice*

As highlighted in the EI framework, testimonial injustice results when members of dominant groups ignore members of minoritized groups when describing their experiences with oppression (Fricker, 2007). As highlighted here, the research about students with minoritized identities and SV is still sparse; for example, only 26 published articles over a 10-year period centered on SWDs and SV. Similarly, in the section examining the literature about SOCs and SV, we noted that 10% of the articles focusing on race and racism centered White students' perspectives about SV directed toward SOCs. The scholarship about SV among college students illustrates testimonial injustice by ignoring the perspectives of students with minoritized identities.

Similarly, the heavy quantitative and postpositivist focus in the research also hinders the testimonies of people with minoritized identities. The majority of the research examined in this project focused on the prevalence and characteristics of SV among various groups of students and failed to employ a theoretical framework that examined these experiences through a power-conscious lens. Even when centering people with minoritized identities, the research primarily focuses on highlighting the number of people who experience the problem, rather than examining the roots of a complicated, nuanced problem rooted in power. Overrelying on quantitative strategies for engaging in research limits the ways that participants' perspectives and ideas are shared in the literature.

### *Hermeneutic Injustice*

Hermeneutic injustice refers to the ways that people's experiences are ignored or invalidated because a community lacks or neglects a framework that may illuminate these experiences (Dotson, 2012). As highlighted above, some researchers sought to uncover and highlight the experiences of students with minoritized identities to ensure that their experiences were represented in the literature. However, when researchers consistently use methodologies, instruments, and frameworks created with and by dominant groups, they engage in hermeneutical injustice. The majority of articles in each section of this study employed quantitative research methods, which are frequently conducted through a postpositivist, "neutral" lens. Although no research is "neutral," postpositivist research requires scholars to assume a neutral stance, asking researchers to engage "objectively" in their scholarship, and requiring researchers to replicate previous studies exactly to ensure valid findings. When replicating studies, researchers frequently use instruments developed for dominant groups to explore minoritized groups' experiences. For example, practices of consent frequently look and sound

differently in queer communities than among heterosexual people (Beres, 2021), yet researchers use the same to measure SV among heterosexual and queer students.

Similarly, throughout our study, we noted that researchers centering the experiences of students with minoritized identities frequently used larger data sets (i.e., the American College Health Association data) to disaggregate the data about specific groups of students. While this is a start to understanding SV directed toward students with minoritized identities, it also illustrates the problem of hermeneutical injustice by continuing to describe the experiences of minoritized people by using instruments designed to measure the experiences of dominant groups. Not only do researchers use instruments designed for and with dominant group members, some researchers also explicitly compare the experiences of students with minoritized identities with those of dominant group members. In the section where we examined the research about SOCs' experiences with SV, we noted that 11 articles (17%) explicitly compared the experiences of SOCs to white students. While there is some benefit to starting an analysis with comparison to develop a baseline understanding of a problem, if not paired with recommendations for improving scholarship, these kinds of comparisons can be harmful. In particular, they perpetuate the notion that dominant group members' experiences are the norm and should be the baseline for comparison.

When the experiences of SOCs, Q/T students, and SWDs are examined using instruments designed by and for cisgender, heterosexual White women, as illustrated by the analysis above, researchers are likely missing or misrepresenting a large portion of knowledge. Using dominant group language to attempt to describe minoritized groups' experiences results in an incomplete understanding of minoritized people's experiences.

### *Willful Ignorance and Contributory Injustice*

Willful hermeneutical injustice or contributory injustice occurs when researchers refuse to learn or consider frameworks developed by minoritized people to explain their experiences (Dotson, 2012; Poulhaus, 2012). As described above, the researchers conducting the research examined in this study did not use theoretical frameworks or instruments relevant to the people whose experiences they wanted to better understand, despite the fact that critical frameworks centering experiences of people with minoritized identities exist.

The choice of topics studied also illustrates willful hermeneutical or contributory injustice. In addition to using instruments designed by and with dominant group members, researchers also consistently examined topics prevalent in the scholarship about dominant group members and SV. For example, across each identity, the most commonly identified topics of exploration included prevalence and risk factors for SV. Because most researchers did not develop or employ instruments with power or identity in mind, they frequently discussed identity as a "risk factor" for experiencing violence. While the intention behind most researchers' work centering prevalence is likely to highlight the ways in which students with minoritized identities are targeted at higher levels for violence, the unintended consequence of the poor framing of this

scholarship is that it insinuates that there is something wrong with the minoritized identity that should be corrected to reduce risk, rather than explicitly naming that oppression as the problem and that people who cause harm likely target minoritized people at higher rates. An example of using methodologies employed by and with dominant group members results in discussing “risk factors” as a problem of the person experiencing harm, rather than “targeting factors” which emphasizes that the person causing harm is targeting people with minoritized identities, either intentionally or unintentionally.

Similarly, when framing identity as a risk factor, researchers engage in contributory injustice by failing to examine or understand perpetration. People causing harm, not people experiencing harm, are the problem to be examined and addressed, yet researchers negligently avoid engaging in any research about perpetration. In fact, we reviewed a total of 191 studies for this project and two examined perpetration. Completely ignoring a significant part of the problem because we collectively refused to consider new or different frameworks contributes to the ongoing problem of SV.

Similarly, another common topic of exploration in the Q/T student and student of color section included bystander intervention; however, of the 12 articles we coded as focusing on bystander intervention, only one article explicitly employed a framework that examined whether bystander intervention was even culturally appropriate in minoritized communities. The rest of the articles on bystander intervention operated from an assumption that bystander intervention was good and effective and that minoritized communities just needed to get on board with using it, with no discussion of if intervening and supporting community members might be called something different among students with minoritized identities.

In each section, researchers also examined help-seeking, disclosure, and reporting among students with minoritized identities, and frequently without a framework to understand whether and how each of these might look and feel differently in minoritized communities than they do in dominant groups. Given the long history of harm caused by systems of authority to people with minoritized identities, examining people with minoritized identities experiences in disclosing, reporting, and labeling their experiences requires researchers to consider a different framing of the problem. Failing to employ frameworks that focus on oppression results in contributory injustice, and a failure to more effectively address and eradicate SV among college students.

## **Recommendations**

Given the lack of attention to power in the research about students with minoritized identities, we recommend that researchers slow down and engage in deeper, more thoughtful analysis about students with minoritized identities and SV. While most researchers are doing the best they can with the knowledge they have about research processes, there is also an element of willful hermeneutical injustice present in the current structures for producing knowledge related to students with minoritized identities and SV. Some critical scholars have been calling for more equitable practices in research that center on minoritized people (Harris et al., 2020; Klein et al., 2021; Linder et al., 2020; Linder & Grimes, 2023), yet many researchers continue to rely

on postpositivist orientations and “neutral” theoretical frameworks and instruments to conduct their work. While some of this is likely because of the ways neoliberal institutions work, requiring researchers to produce quantity over quality, researchers who have secured tenure have the opportunity and a responsibility to interrupt the notion of publish or perish. While we (academics) publish, others are perishing *because* of our faulty research processes. The neoliberal institution’s hyperfocus on producing more and more research at the expense of producing thoughtful, high-quality scholarship results in our collective inability and unwillingness to address the problem at hand.

Among the more straightforward recommendations to address the problems at hand, we recommend researchers engage in more qualitative research employing critical or constructivist epistemological paradigms for this work. Additionally, we implore researchers to employ critical theoretical frameworks to guide their inquiry and engage in discussion about the findings of the scholarship. Researchers must employ anti-oppression frameworks, rather than deficit-oriented frameworks, in their scholarship. Although we did not examine it in this article, members of the research team expressed significant distress as a result of engaging in this context analysis. The ways that researchers discuss identity as “risk factors” for sexual assault was defeating for members of the research team, especially newer researchers who have not been immersed in the scholarship for decades. Addressing this problem is a relatively straightforward fix, and is addressed in the previous section on hermeneutical injustice. When we, as researchers, continue to employ the same frameworks over and over without considering their impact on the framing of the discussion about identity as the “risk factor,” we cause further harm to people with minoritized identities by ignoring the *oppression* that contributes to sexual violence.

Of note, most of the conceptual, historical, discourse/content analysis pieces explicitly focused on oppression in their analyses, examining current events and practices with a critical lens. For example, articles in this section centering SOCs focused on Harvard faculty responses to the film *The Hunting Ground* (Kennedy & McCann, 2020), analysis of social movements related to gender-based violence (Keys, 2021), and campus climate survey instruments (Brubaker et al., 2017) to understand whether campus practices centered racial analysis in their work. Most scholars who wrote articles in this section argued that most campus practices lack a racial analysis, despite the long history of the intersections between racism and sexual violence in what is now considered the United States and called for researchers and practitioners to engage in more thoughtful critical racial analysis.

Given that researchers engaged in non-empirical research are effectively engaging a power analysis in their work, we know it is possible to do power-conscious, critical scholarship centering on issues of power and oppression. We recommend two very specific strategies that researchers can employ immediately to address issues of power in research on SV. First, as reviewers for journals, speak up! Do not review articles based on how it has always been done, but rather, think about how we want it to be. The fact that reviewers still review articles employing a post-positivist framework, even for scholarship that is not postpositivist in nature, is a huge part of the problem. As researchers responsible for advancing scholarship to eradicate SV among college students, we *must* push our

colleagues to do better. We must stay on top of emerging methodologies and frameworks and require our colleagues to use those frameworks in their work. Continuing to allow researchers to employ deficit-based frameworks or instruments developed for and by dominant groups contributes to the problem of poor scholarship.

Similarly, as current researchers socialize new researchers into the field, we must avoid gatekeeping and requiring researchers to use stale frameworks to engage in scholarship about a problem that requires a much more thoughtful solution than what we—most current researchers—are currently engaging in. Current researchers should recruit thoughtful, critical graduate students to our work, and then listen to them. When new students ask questions about why we do what we do and emphasize that how current researchers are doing things does not make sense, listen. Ask questions. Inquire about how researchers could do it differently and then work with the student to make that happen. Employing visual methods, participatory action research, and community-based research certainly requires more work on the part of the researcher who has been engaged in research longer, but it is worth it. The fresh ideas and perspectives that new researchers bring should be celebrated and developed, rather than forced into a box of “this is how we do it.”

## Conclusion

Rates of SV remain incredibly high among college students, and more so among students with minoritized identities (Cantor et al., 2019). The failure of researchers to engage in epistemically just research contributes to the problem of ineffectively addressing SV. When research continually relies on the exclusion of minoritized people and dominant ways of knowing to construct knowledge, we collectively miss new concepts, ideas, and ways of thinking about violence that may alleviate the problem of SV among college students. To truly eradicate violence, we must center those most harmed by violence to truly understand the dynamics of power and dominance.


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