Present Tense

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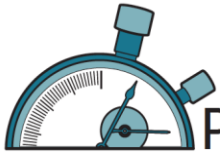
Removing Agency and Perpetuating Violence: Rape Culture in University Student Handbooks

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A harrowing number of college students experience sexual violence while in college ("Get Statistics"; Cantor et al.; Marine).[1] Federal policy has tried to address this pervasive problem (e.g., Clery Act, Title IX, Violence Against Women Act). Universities' enactment of these policies must meet the bare minimum set forth by the federal government,[2] and universities have control over policies' language. Those choices are where other scholars' and this article's analyses focus. Unsurprisingly, scholars have found that universities' sexual violence policies do not always comply with these laws, or that when they do comply, their enactment harms survivors (e.g., Karjane et al.; Richards; Iverson). These scholars' important work can also be extended to writing studies by examining if these policies perpetuate rape culture ideologies,[3] which is the focus of this article.

As many rhetoricians discuss, policy deeply affects ideology. For instance, Oriana Gilson analyzed breastfeeding policies for how policies can have "material impact of societal inequities and embodied realities" (138). These material impacts overlap with power and ideology in what Carolyn Miller refers to as "administered genres" (23), which includes student handbooks. Handbooks and other administered genres "[come] into being to suit those in power, those with the authority to regulate the social and symbolic interactions of others" (24).

Furthermore, Iverson's analysis of sexual violence policy discusses how with intersectional analysis, "policy is never neutral" and has power dynamics embedded throughout (227). Handbooks' procedures and policies maintain and "suit those in power" (Miller 24) and have an extreme influence on students' "social practices," such as survivors' trust in their institutions (e.g., institutional betrayal)[4] and how all students' rape ideologies form. With Miller and Iverson's findings, not only are handbooks at the center of college students' ideologies, but they are also texts that uphold the power of those in charge—those who have a vested interest in underreporting and dismissing allegations of sexual violence. Thus, as the field has already set forth: language around sexual violence matters not only for material conditions but also societal ideologies.

Because we need to examine the power within the texts and how policies represent an institution's values, critical discourse analysis (CDA) has been used in writing studies to critically interrogate texts in this way (Huckin et al.; Powell; Price; Pantelides). CDA can contribute to this topic by allowing us to "[examine] the impact that contexts, power dynamics, and social interaction have on written texts and processes" (Huckin et al. 111). Therefore, I use CDA's methodological influence to examine student handbooks. First, I discuss my methods.
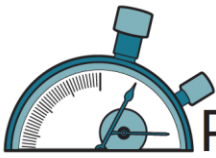
Then, I analyze policies at the macro- and micro-levels. Finally, I offer implications and recommendations of where we can go from here.

Critical Discourse Analysis of Handbooks

My initial stratified, clustered, random sampling included 13 student handbooks, which falls into the range of comparable studies (e.g., Dirks; Cass; Schwartz et al.). In this sampling, I proportionally represented various institutional variables: two- versus four-year; size; public versus private; geographic region. These handbooks were selected from the 2019-2020 academic year. Through multiple passes, I looked for patterns across the entire corpus.[5] I started with *in vivo* coding, and then, used latent coding. Next, I condensed codes before repeating the processes of latent coding and condensing until I reached a manageable number of codes. Throughout, I maintained a coding scheme that includes a code, its description, and examples. This allowed me to keep track of my data and interpret it consistently to ensure there was no "drift" (Creswell and Creswell 202) in the coding process. I did multiple passes of the data to ensure the condensed, latent codes represented the *in vivo* codes and the entire process was overviewed by my thesis advisor[6] (see fig. 1).

Specifically, during coding, I analyzed handbooks[7] at the macro-level of potential silences within policies and at the micro-level if rape culture ideologies were present. For potential silences within policies, I looked at the policies that existed, using the *in vivo* codes. Across the corpus, I looked to see if there were similar policies within the other handbooks.
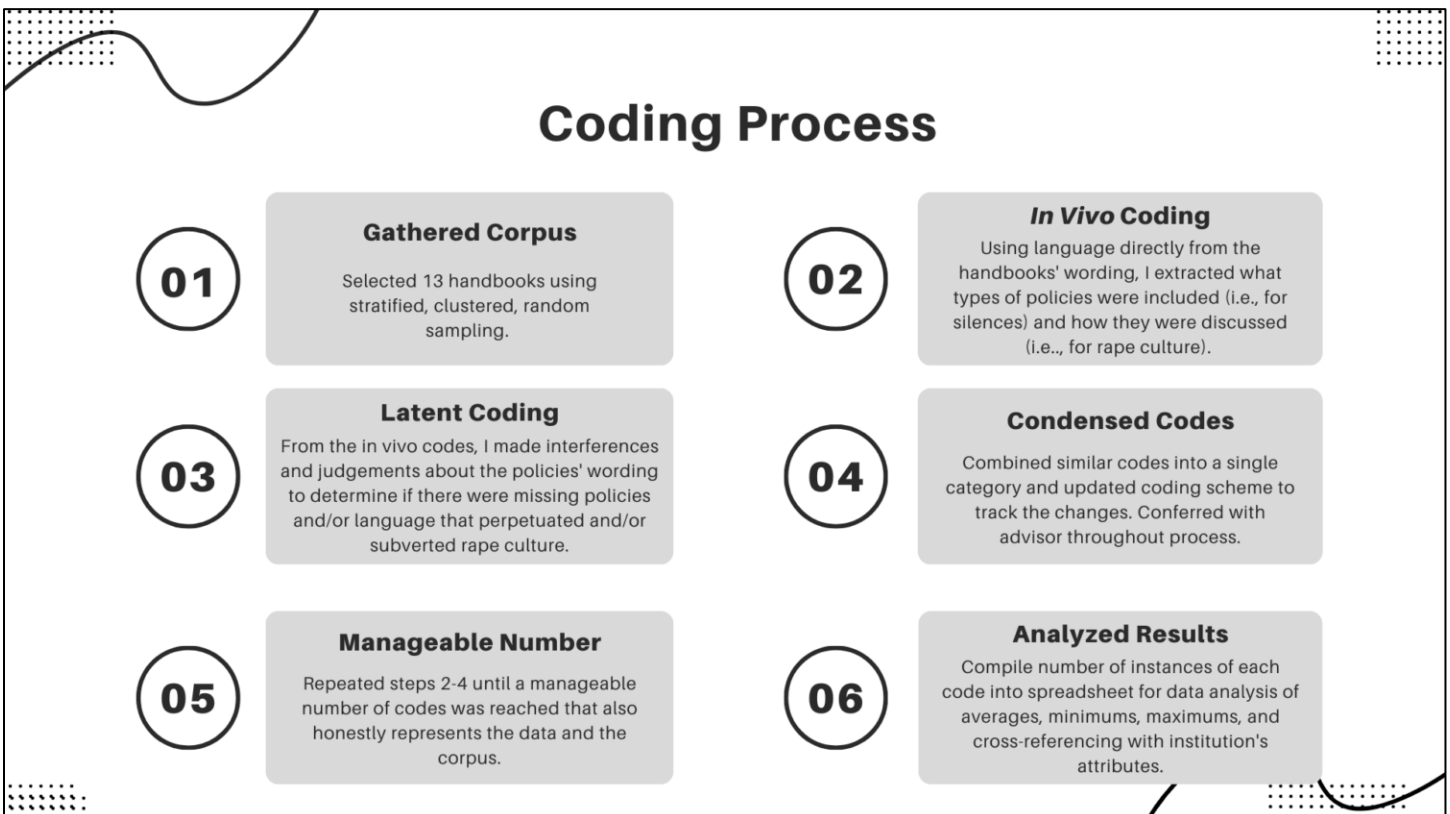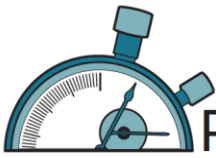

Coding Process

01 **Gathered Corpus**
Selected 13 handbooks using stratified, clustered, random sampling.

02 ***In Vivo* Coding**
Using language directly from the handbooks' wording, I extracted what types of policies were included (i.e., for silences) and how they were discussed (i.e.., for rape culture).

03 **Latent Coding**
From the in vivo codes, I made interferences and judgements about the policies' wording to determine if there were missing policies and/or language that perpetuated and/or subverted rape culture.

04 **Condensed Codes**
Combined similar codes into a single category and updated coding scheme to track the changes. Conferred with advisor throughout process.

05 **Manageable Number**
Repeated steps 2-4 until a manageable number of codes was reached that also honestly represents the data and the corpus.

06 **Analyzed Results**
Compile number of instances of each code into spreadsheet for data analysis of averages, minimums, maximums, and cross-referencing with institution's attributes.

Fig. 1: Coding process.

From condensing each policy area into a latent code, I determined if each handbook had policies in the following areas:

- Sexual/Romantic Relationships with Power Discrepancies[8]
- Interpersonal Relationship Violence[9]
- Consent
- Stalking
- Sexual Exploitation
- Sexual Harassment
- Sexual Assault (non-penetrative)
- Sexual Assault (penetrative)

From here, I evaluated each policy area (if even present), to determine how universities were defining them. Within each of these policies, I then analyzed them at the microlevel for rape culture ideologies (see fig. 2).

To do this analysis, I collated the dominant myths and narratives in the United States include myths that survivors fabricate violence, survivors invite violence, sexual violence only occurs by strangers, in dark alleys, and/or against pretty, white women. These myths can be expanded further, but generally reside in those mythical realms (Wanjuki, "If…"; Patterson; Payne et al.). Then, I coded each policy for whether it was subverting and/or perpetuating various rape culture myths using the language of the policy itself. Next, I condensed the codes into fewer coding categories: honoring versus removing survivor agency as well as combating versus conforming to rape myth ideologies (more in "Rape Culture Ideologies" section).
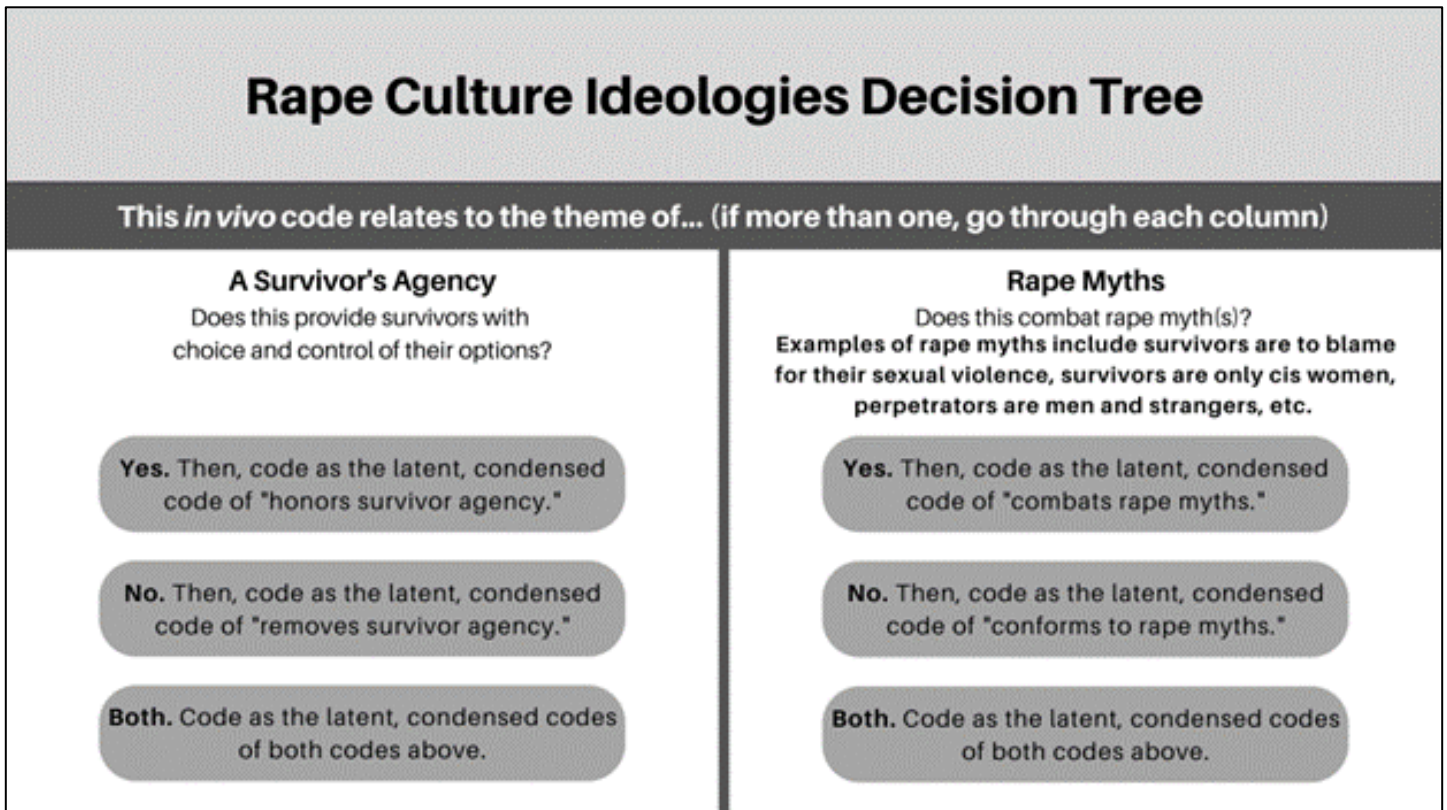

Fig. 2: Rape culture ideologies decision tree.

3

Policy Gaps

Within policy gaps in handbooks, only 2 schools had policies in all 8 areas. Almost all handbooks were missing policies on sexual/romantic relationships with power discrepancies (see fig. 3). In this section, I specifically delve into the silences within three policy areas: consent, sexual assault (non-penetrative), and sexual assault (penetrative).

and that silence/lack of resistance did not equal consent. However, this meant that while 90% of schools included these important distinctions, there were still 10% that did not. Less than 50% of schools addressed that consent must be ongoing, revocable, that past acts did not constitute consent, and/or that age must be of a legal minimum. Additionally, no schools mentioned that consent cannot be given if sexual activity occurs from deceit or deception,
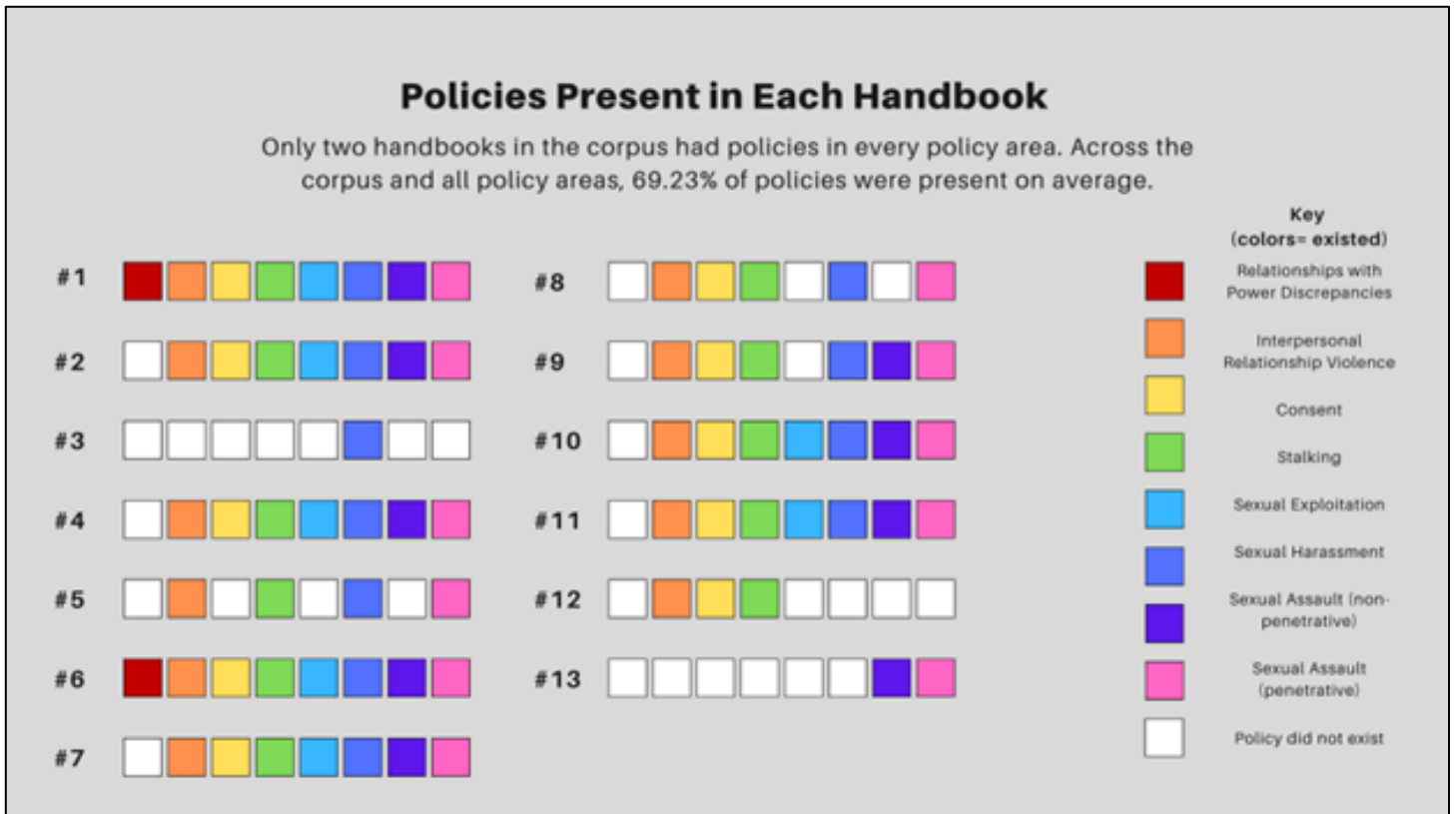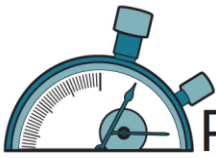

Policies Present in Each Handbook

Only two handbooks in the corpus had policies in every policy area. Across the corpus and all policy areas, 69.23% of policies were present on average.

Key (colors= existed)
- Relationships with Power Discrepancies
- Interpersonal Relationship Violence
- Consent
- Stalking
- Sexual Exploitation
- Sexual Harassment
- Sexual Assault (non-penetrative)
- Sexual Assault (penetrative)
- Policy did not exist

Fig. 3: Policies present in each handbook.

Three schools had no policies on consent. For two of these institutions, they both had some semblance of sexual assault clauses, but those were null and void when there was no definition of consent, as sexual assault is inherently defined by a lack of consent. 90% of schools that did have a consent policy addressed that consent must be affirmative, willing/voluntary,

which is particularly important for sexual assault policies, such as where a person could pretend to be another, a person could lie about their STD/HIV status, and/or falsified contraceptive use.

For the sexual assault (non-penetrative) policies, four schools did not have policies. Generally, the

lack of this policy correlated with "very small" and "small" institution size.[10] Of the 9 schools that did have this policy, there were 8 instances of mentioning that this type of sexual assault was non-consensual. There were also 8 instances of mentioning that this type of violence included a perpetrator's intentional contact, but they were not the same 8 institutions for both. Across the corpus, while the most common example of non-penetrative sexual assault was the perpetrator touching the survivor's body, many other types/examples were not included in clauses, thus meaning that they should be expanded to include more types of non-penetrative sexual assault.

For the sexual assault (penetrative) policies, only one school did not have a policy. Of the 12 remaining schools that had a penetrative sexual assault policy, all 12 mentioned that it was based on lack of consent whereas only one school included attempted sexual assault in this policy area. For perpetrator's actions, generally, policies included how penetration by genitals and/or objects to another's mouth, vagina, or anus constitutes sexual assault. The exception to this was only one school included non-specified objects into a survivor's body, which

was important to include. Moreover, all types of bodily penetration, regardless of by what, needs to be accounted for in penetrative sexual assault clauses. For both non-penetrative and penetrative sexual assault, the phrase "and/or by force" should be removed, as all sexual assault is violent and forceful, and this phrase created a false narrative that there were worse types of sexual violence than others. Overall, across the corpus' macro-level, many necessary policies were not included, or if they were included, they were problematic.

Rape Culture Ideologies

To examine the micro-level of policies further, there were two main coded categories with two sides each. First was honoring versus removing survivor agency. Second was combating versus conforming to rape myth ideologies. In this section, I discuss each coded category and the CDA results (see fig. 4).
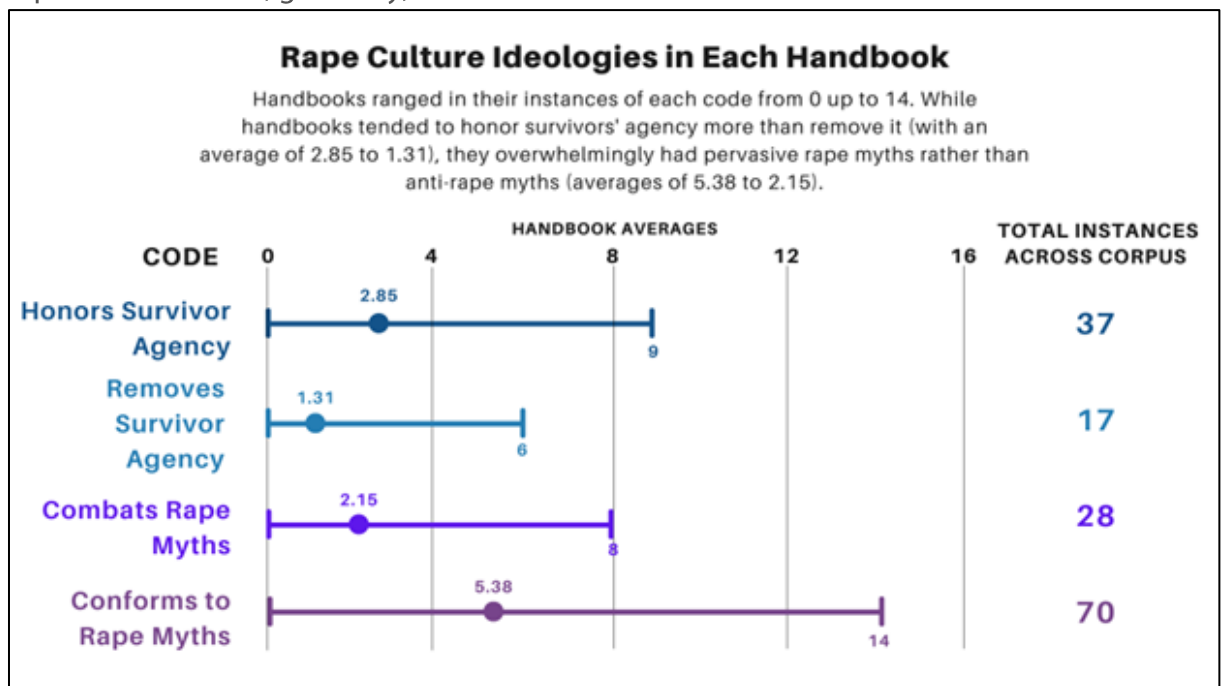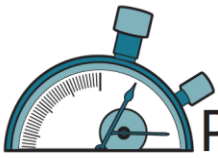

**Fig. 4:** Rape culture ideologies in each handbook.

For the latent codes of honoring versus removing survivor agency, *honoring survivor agency* was coded when handbooks provided survivors with choice and control over their options post-victimization. For instance, one handbook declared, "A representative may accompany you to [the school's] Police Department or the hospital, but they recognize that it is your decision." Another example was when handbooks also allowed survivors amnesty for drug/alcohol violations. This meant that if a survivor was drinking or using drugs, which would have been against campus policy, then they could still report their assaults without fear of repercussions for violating the drug/alcohol policy. This allowed for survivors to be able to choose whether to report or not without universities punishing them. Across the handbooks, *honoring survivor agency* was coded 37 total times with a range of 0 to 9, a mode of 1, and an average of 2.85 instances. Even though this was the second most prevalent code, the range of 0 to 9 indicates that many schools do not honor survivor agency, as 7 of 13 handbooks had 0 to 1 instance. In the schools that had more than 4 instances of this code, there were no correlations between region, residential status, public/private, school size, etc.

Conversely, *removing survivor agency* was coded when policies treated the survivor as "helpless" and incapable of making their own decisions. For example, some handbooks declared what a survivor "should" and "must" do as well as continued to refer to them as "victims" who may be "helpless." In this coding category, *removing survivor agency* was coded 17 total times with a range of 0 to 6, a mode of 1, and an average of 1.31 instances. For the four institutions that had more than one instance, they also tried to dictate and control what actions survivors should take, which discounts

trauma and how survivors already had agency taken away from them—that doesn't need to happen from their institutions as well.

Combatting rape myths was in the second coding category and was coded 28 total times with a range of 0 to 8, a mode of 0, and an average of 2.15 instances. Many handbooks in this coded category dispelled the heteronormative notions of who can be a perpetrator and survivor. Another example of this code was, "If you are the victim of sexual assault, the most important thing is to know that the sexual assault was not your fault. YOU are not guilty," which actively dispelled the rape myth that an assault is the survivor's fault. Three of the four schools that had the most codes in this category were also the "very large" institutional size. This possibly suggested that the larger the institution, the more likely the handbooks were to have been amended by authors who sought to dispel rape culture.

Conversely, *conforming to rape myths* was coded 70 total times—the most of any category. This coding category had a range of 0 to 14 and an average of 5.38 instances. Two handbooks did not have instances of this code at all. However, just because this code did not appear, that didn't mean the handbooks were excellent examples, as one of those universities did not even include the necessary policies. Ironically, a different institution was both the school to have the most *combats rape myths* as well as *conforms to rape myths*, which indicated that while schools might subvert some aspects of rape culture, they did not universally subvert it. Likewise, there was a wide array of myths that policies were perpetuating, including, but not limited to, that survivors lie/ "asked for" sexual violence, the perpetrator's life was more important, sexual violence happened to a
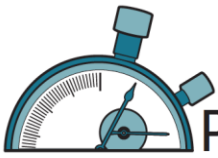
certain type of person, etc. For instance, one handbook stated, "Individuals should be aware of, and carefully consider, the potential consequences of the use of alcohol and other drugs [which] can lower inhibitions and create an atmosphere of confusion over [consent]." This handbook's clause is completely unnecessary as consent cannot be given when participants are not sober, but it also perpetuate rape culture by implying a survivor "asked for" (Payne et al.) being assaulted if they were not sober. In another example, one institution, while appearing to try to counter rape culture, actually perpetuated victim blaming in the process. In their handbook, they offered mini-examples to show what was and was not sexual misconduct, but in the storytelling, the omniscient narrator said, "Why else would she have come up to his room alone after the party?." This handbook never refuted the rape culture ideology of victim blaming. This coded category indicated that many policies are non-intersectional and actively perpetuated rape culture.

Implications and Conclusions

Institutions and their policies enact harm and violence through their silences and rape culture ideologies, which not only harms survivors but adds to rape culture acceptance. Institutional genres "suit those in power" (Miller 24) and create "heightened risk" (Bybee 3) for survivors. Universities are actively complicit in rape culture through their policies' language choices, and this study's corpus failed survivors—past, present, and future. If a policy did one facet of rape culture, they were not always doing it across the board. Overall, there were no correlations between institutions' region, type, size, or residential status, which indicates that rape culture and harmful policies are ubiquitous across the country.

Institutions will continue to betray and harm survivors if they do not act and amend their policies now[11] for inclusivity, intersectionality, and anti-rape culture. Based on my findings, I offer the following suggestions:

1. Revise policies to be inclusive and intersectional as well as actively dispel rape culture. This includes providing an array of resources for all survivors and all their various positionalities. Further study is necessary to analyze other universities' texts and behaviors (e.g., websites, education, Title IX proceedings) for conformity to rape culture.
2. Add information about education and prevention programming within handbooks to educate about systemic violence and oppression and its overlaps with sexual violence.
3. Include all policy areas comprehensively. All schools need all types of sexual violence defined and account for.

With these suggestions, it is important to note that institutional change is slow, and in the meantime, sexual violence continues to occur, and survivors are still being betrayed by their institutions. There are still many facets of campus sexual violence that also need drastic reform (and abolition), such as campus climate surveys, prevention programming, reporting options, resources for survivors, funding, and so on. From here, critical discourse analyses should also be done on all of these institutional practices, policies, and texts in order to better understand all of the ways sexual violence and campus policies can be improved— because we owe that to survivors, to each other, to ourselves.
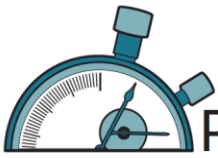
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Endnotes

1. Relying on statistics alone for the scope of sexual violence is one-dimensional and problematic, as they rely on survivor's willingness to disclose, vary by methodology of the study, or solely focus on cisgender women when cross-comparing with different identities, such as race or sexuality. Therefore, they will never fully represent the widespread nature of sexual violence.
2. As stated by the Department of Education, they say about policy and practices, "A school "remain[s] free to adopt best practices […]."
3. Rape culture allows sexual violence to oppress and is "reinforced on both [macro] and micro levels" (Wanjuki, "What Does…").
4. Institutional betrayal, as defined by Freyd, "refers to wrongdoings perpetrated by an institution upon individuals dependent on that institution, including failure to prevent or respond supportively to wrongdoings by individuals (e.g., sexual assault) committed within the context of the institution."
5. Coding here is defined by Stake as, "sorting all data sets according to topics, themes, and issues important to the study" (151). Coding was also a common method to pair with CDA in writing studies (e.g., Huckin et al.; Price; Powel).
6. This study was completed at the beginning of the pandemic in March 2020, so that left many constraints for external validation as my master's program finished. If this study were to be repeated, additional outside validation would be used.
7. I will not be naming the universities that were included because the patterns in the corpus could be applied beyond the confines of these 13 universities.
8. Specifically, this policy area is referring to uneven sexual and romantic relationships, such as supervisor-worker or advisor-student. This is not necessarily referring to differences in identity and positionality, but these most certainly are which another facet further study into policy and its enactment is needed.
9. Other names for this term include domestic violence and intimate partner violence; however, those terms imply certain heteronormative constructions of what constitutes relationships, so for my reference to these policies, I use the more inclusive "interpersonal relationship violence."
10. As defined by the Carnegie classifications.
11. Worth noting is that these revisions should not only happen now, but they also should be revisited regularly as culture and ideologies are constantly changing and policies need to change to reflect better practices.
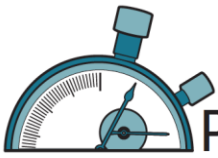
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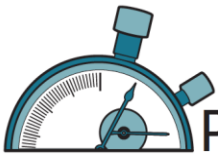
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