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A COMPARISON OF SEXUALLY ASSAULTIVE,
COERCIVE AND NON-AGGRESSIVE COLLEGE MEN

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Abstract

This study compares local prevalence rates of college male sexual aggression with those established nationally, and explores variables that may contribute to the development of sexually aggressive college men. A survey of 1602 (M = 619, W = 983) undergraduate students from a mid-sized university revealed rates similar to those found by a national study. Results of discriminant analysis indicated that sexually aggressive men were likely to have more sexual partners, to have been victims of childhood sexual and/or physical abuse, to have had their first sexual intercourse experience at an earlier age, and to have engaged in higher levels of voluntary intimacy with women. Results are interpreted in terms of prevailing models of male sexual aggression.

Knox and Wilson (1983) found that college women reported unwanted pressure to engage in sexual behavior as the most frequent problem they encountered in dating situations. These findings are consistent with other studies that have reported a high incidence of male sexual aggression in dating situations (Garrett-Gooding & Senter, 1987; Koss, Gidycz & Wisniewski, 1987; Rapaport & Burkhart, 1984). College men inflict a wide range of abusive sexual behaviors (Rapaport & Burkhart, 1984) which frequently are undetected and unreported (Koss, Leonard, Beezley & Oros, 1985).

Basic theories explaining the etiology of male sexual aggression include psychodynamic, socialization, social learning, and interactive theories. Psychodynamic theory views rape as a symptom of psychopathology originating in a flawed childhood, whereas socialization theory views rape as an extreme expression of the way perpetrators view their roles within society. Social learning theorists claim that sexual aggression is learned by observing others, and those supporting interactive theories suggest that multiple factors including background precursors, personality, attitudes and opportunity interact to generate sexual aggression.

Studies of undetected sexually aggressive college men have reported various psychological characteristics, attitudes, and value orientations among this population. Adherence to traditional sex role stereotyped attitudes has been associated with belief in rape myths (Wilson, Faison, & Britton, 1983) and positively correlated with college male sexual aggression (Koss, et al., 1985; Peterson & Franzese, 1987). Rapaport and Burkhart (1984) found that personality traits such as irresponsibility and lack of social conscience and attitudes endorsing aggression toward women were useful predictors of self-reported sexually coercive behavior by college men. Koss, et al., (1985) also reported that sexually aggressive college men tend to be older and to have more sexual partners. College men's sexual abuse of women has also been found to relate to

misanthropy, lower internal locus of control, low self-esteem, and lower anomie (Peterson & Franzese, 1987).

A few studies of sexually aggressive college men have explored the influence of childhood victimization experience and the influence of family developmental experience. Burke, Stets & Pirog-Good's (1988) finding that childhood physical abuse did not influence college men's propensity to inflict sexual abuse contradicts findings of other studies (Koss & Dinero, 1988; Wilson et al., 1983). Gwartney-Gibbs, Stockard & Bohmer (1987) reported that having observed physical violence between their parents was associated with sexually aggressive behavior; they, however, did not query their subjects regarding sustained childhood abuse. Brief measures of childhood sexual experience have also been found to correlate with sexual aggression (Koss & Dinero, 1989; Miller & Marshall, 1987; Wilson et al., 1983). This study examined the effects of childhood victimization experiences, family background, and personal sexual relationship perceptions to expand the findings of previous studies.

Method

Sample

This study was conducted at a mid-sized public university in central Illinois. A sample of 1602 (M = 619, W = 983) undergraduate students from various colleges, majors, and levels of study was compared with a national study (Koss, et al., 1987). Men (N = 515) responding to all 19 designated variables were subdivided into non-aggressive (N = 387), coercive (N = 84), and assaultive (N = 44) groups for discriminant analysis.

Instrument

All subjects completed the Sexual Experiences Survey (SES), which is designed to show rape as an extreme behavior on a continuum with normal male

behavior within the culture (Koss & Oros, 1982). The reliability and validity of this instrument have been assessed by Koss and Gidycz (1985) using several different populations of college students. Sections of the original national survey incorporating personality assessment and a rape attitude measure were eliminated to shorten testing time and facilitate data processing.

Survey Procedure

Classes from a variety of colleges, majors, and levels of study were selected from the 1989 fall class schedule. Instructors were contacted by phone to elicit their cooperation, and 54 classes were surveyed between September 8, 1989 and November 20, 1989.

To comply with professional guidelines for research (Sieber & Saks, 1989), a written script was developed to explain the survey process and to suggest resources for any student respondent who experienced an intense or upsetting reaction to the survey questions. Students were informed of the purpose of the study, told that participation was entirely voluntary, and assured that their answers would be kept confidential and analyzed anonymously. Students who had completed the survey in another class were instructed not to take it a second time, and all were given a list of the resources mentioned in the written script.

Answer sheets were examined to detect highly unlikely responses to demographic questions and to detect patterns (i.e., all true) in responses. Questionable answer sheets were discarded.

Scoring

Koss & Dinero's (1989) scoring procedure was used to divide men and women reporting aggression and victimization experiences since the age of 14 into five groups (non-aggressive, sexual contact, sexual coercion, attempted rape, and rape) to make comparisons with the national study (Koss et al., 1987). Then the male contact and coercion groups were combined to form this study's coercive

group, and the attempted rape and rape groups were combined to form this study's assaultive group.

Rational thought was used to transform variables into dichotomous or continuous forms for entry into the discriminant analysis. Dichotomous variables included Religion (whether or not respondents indicated a religious preference), Divorce (whether or not parents had been divorced), and Mother (Was there a time when you were growing up when you did not live with your mother?).

The variable Step-parent consisted of three levels (1 = no step-parent, 2 = one step-parent, 3 = two step-parents). Three levels (1 = no sexual contact, 2 = kissing or petting, and 3 = sexual intercourse) of voluntary sexual intimacy with the opposite sex were used to form the variable, Level of Sexual Intimacy. The variable Age of First Intercourse was based on respondents' answers regarding the age range in which they had first engaged in sexual intercourse, either forced or voluntarily (The item used to generate this variable asked respondents to report within an age range rather than a specific year). Childhood sexual abuse experience, Child Sex Abuse, was measured using nine items developed by Finkelhor (1979) and scored according to Koss and Dinero (1989). Responses to these items were scored by placing subjects in the highest category in which they had reported an experience (1 = no sexual experience, 2 = exhibitionism, 3 = fondling, 4 = attempted rape, and 5 = rape).

Items investigating respondents' current relationships with the opposite sex required respondents to indicate on a five point Likert scale (1 = "not at all" to 5 = "very much") the extent to which they felt able to trust others (Trust Others), to make friends (Friends), to get close to others (Closeness), and to maintain relationships (Maintain Relationships). The same five point Likert scale was used to measure the variable Strictness (How strict were your parents in making you obey their rules?). A five point Likert scale ranging from "never" to "11 or more times in an average month" was used for the three items

measuring frequency of punishment for physical play or roughhousing (Excessive Punishment), having witnessed physical blows between their parents (Observed Physical Abuse) and having sustained physical blows from a parent (Experienced Physical Abuse). The variable, Number of Partners, was measured by an item which asked the number of different women with whom they had had sexual intercourse in their lifetime (Scores range from 1 = none to 9 = over 50 women). Blank spaces were provided for respondents to record their age (Age), the income of the family in which they grew up (Family Income), and the population of the town in which they grew up (Home Town Population). The latter two items were codified into continuous categories for analysis.

Analysis

Frequencies of male sexual aggression and female victimization were obtained and chi-squares calculated to compare prevalence rates with those reported nationally (Koss et al., 1987).

The direct entry method of the SPSS^X (SPSS^X User's Guide, 1986) discriminant function was used to determine which of the variables measured here discriminated between self-reported non-aggressive, coercive, and assaultive college men. Analysis of variance was used to check the results of the discriminant analysis, and to test for linear relationships between levels of variables and levels of sexual aggression.

Results

Data from this local survey of one campus were compared with the national survey (see Table 1). Compared with national survey results (Koss et al., 1987), significantly more women ($\chi^2 = 13.52$, $df = 1$, $p < .001$) in this sample reported no sexual victimization experiences and significantly fewer women ($\chi^2 = 8.83$, $df = 1$, $p < .001$) reported having been victims of attempted rape. Although more men

in this study reported inflicting unwanted sexual contact and rape than were reported nationally, the number of men (25.5 %) reporting having inflicted some form of sexual aggression was still not large enough to match the 47.7 % of women students reporting victimization experiences.

The discriminant analysis presented in Table 2 produced one significant discriminant function. Squaring the canonical correlation revealed that 9.61 % of the variance in the function was accounted for by group membership. The more severe the group's level of sexual aggression, the more positively the group's centroid correlated with the function. Variables most highly correlated with the function were: Partners ($r = .70$), Child Sexual Abuse ($r = .51$), Age of First Intercourse ($r = .38$), Level of Sexual Intimacy ($r = .33$), Experienced Physical Abuse ($r = .32$) and Trust Others ($r = .32$). Analysis of variance for each variable by the three groups supported results of the discriminant analysis and revealed significant linear trends for several of the variables. Table 3 presents means and the statistical significance of these analyses for all variables. The three dichotomous variables loaded on the second function and were nonsignificant with chi-square analysis (Religion: $\chi^2 = 1.47$, $df = 2$, $p = .48$; Divorce: $\chi^2 = .15$, $df = 2$, $p = .93$; Mother: $\chi^2 = .01$, $df = 2$, $p = .99$).

The discriminant model produced by this study correctly classified 76.12 percent of the cases, or 1.12 percent more cases than would have been correctly classified by placing all subjects into the largest group (non-aggressive). Ninety-two percent fewer errors were being made in classifying non-aggressive men, and two percent fewer errors in identifying assaultive men than would have been expected by chance. Classification of coercive men was no more accurate than that expected by chance.

Discussion

The finding that fewer men report sexual aggression when compared with the women reporting victimization has been noted by other researchers (Koss et al., 1987; Garrett-Gooding & Senter, 1987). Koss et al. (1987) hypothesized that some of the perpetrators may have been community members rather than college men, or possibly some of the women were victimized before they entered college. Garrett-Gooding & Senter (1987) however suggest that the men and women are perceiving the same experiences quite differently. That is, due to misperception, miscommunication, or socialization, men interpret the same sexual experience differently from their women partners. It is also possible that some men are assaulting more than a single victim. Future research needs to explore this phenomenon.

The finding that sexually aggressive men in this study had more sexual partners may be a result of their willingness to force women to engage in unwanted sexual contact. Future researchers could address the question of whether sexually aggressive men desire and seek more sexual partners or whether their sexually aggressive behaviors prematurely end relationships causing them to search more frequently for new partners.

This study found that childhood physical and sexual victimization experiences were significantly related to the likelihood of college men inflicting sexual aggression. Other studies (Koss & Dinero, 1989; Wilson et al., 1983) have reported these associations as well. Findings here are that sustained physical abuse rather than observed physical abuse contributes significantly more strongly to subsequent propensity to engage in sexual aggression. This differs from the findings of Gwartney-Gibbs, Stockard & Bohmer (1987), who in their mailed survey of college students, report an association between observed

parental violence and personal sexual aggression. They, however, did not assess any influence of personal childhood sexual or physical abuse.

Due to an ambiguity in the question, it is not known whether the sexually coercive and assaultive men in this study voluntarily engaged in sexual intercourse at earlier ages than non-aggressive men or whether they were forced. Research is needed which investigates the circumstances associated with an earlier age of first sexual intercourse. It is interesting to note that the non-aggressive group here registers a mean age of first intercourse which is noticeably higher than the national average of 15.7 years (Center for Population Options, in press).

The sexually aggressive college men in this study had more willingly engaged in higher levels of sexual intimacy with women than had the non-aggressive men. Considering the Wilson et al. (1983) finding that sexually aggressive men place a high value on sexual activity, this is not surprising. The sexual aggressor's willingness to force sexual contact may also contribute to these higher levels of sexual intimacy.

The finding that coercive and assaultive men reported being able to trust women more than their non-aggressive counterparts is of limited usefulness because the concept of trust in this questionnaire was not well defined. The finding is also curiously incongruent with previous findings (Koss et al., 1985; Rapaport & Burkhart, 1984) that sexually aggressive men are more likely to view heterosexual relationships as adversarial. It is possible that aggressors are interpreting "trust" in an entirely different manner. These aggressors may indeed believe they "trust" women, misinterpreting this construct just as they misperceive their own coercion and assault behaviors. This tendency of sexually aggressive men to misperceive, misinterpret and mislabel experiences such as "trust" and "willingness" may arise from the same flawed view of relationships between the genders. It is interesting to note that aggressors ranked themselves

higher than non-aggressors on all four dimensions of interpersonal relationships with women.

The constructs of "trust" and "willingness" noted here need further exploration as do other dimensions of heterosexual relationships, as perceived by aggressors. Further research which tests a more complex, sophisticated model of male sexual aggression is needed to establish those critical factors which interact most significantly to trigger coercion and assault.

Conclusions

This survey revealed that while 47.7% of these college women self-report sexual victimization, only 25.2% of the men acknowledge sexual aggression. Family background and current relationship variables were analyzed for groups of non-aggressive, coercive and assaultive men. A modest discriminating function including the variables, Number of Partners, Childhood Sexual Abuse, Age of First Intercourse, Level of Sexual Intimacy, Experienced Physical Abuse and Trust Others, accounted for 9.61% of the variance between groups. Analysis of variance confirmed the discrimination and trend analysis revealed a significant linear relationship for these variables.

These findings suggest a continuum with respect to childhood abuse and levels of sexual aggression. However, the enigmatic findings regarding intimacy and trust need further exploration. This level of discrimination is inadequate to support a psychodynamic model for hidden aggressors, though it lends partial support to a social learning model. The study more strongly suggests the inclusion of childhood abuse variables and earlier sexual initiation in a multi-factorial, interactive model of male sexual aggression.

Table 1: Prevalence Rate Percentages for Sexual Aggression and Victimization Since Age 14

Level of Aggression or Victimization	Women		Men	
	National (N=3,187) %	Local (N=983) %	National (N=2,972) %	Local (N=619) %
None	45.6	52.3**	75.6	74.8
Sexual Contact	14.9	15.6	9.8	10.3*
Sexual Coercion	11.6	12.2	6.9	5.7
Attempted Rape	12.1	4.9**	3.2	2.6
Rape	15.8	15.0	4.6	6.6*

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .001$.

Table 2: Discriminate Analysis of Variables Associated with Sexual Aggression

Function	Eigenvalue	Percent of Variance	Canonical Correlation	Wilks's lambda	X ²	df	p
0				.88	61.83	38	.0086
1	.11	85.25	.31	.98	9.46	18	.9481
2	.02	14.75	.14				

Table 3: Means and Statistical Significance of Variables: Sexually Non-aggressive, Coercive, and Assaultive College Men

Variable	Potential Range	Means						ANOVA		Trend Analysis	
		Non-Aggressive N=387		Coercive N=84		Assaultive N=44					
		M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	F(2,512)	p	F(1,512)	p
Function 1											
Number of Partners ^a	0 - > 50	2.15	1.60	4.79	1.98	6.36	1.99	13.99	.0000	25.66	.0000
Child Sex Abuse	1 - 5	2.10	1.22	2.44	1.37	2.80	1.37	7.66	.0005	15.33	.0001
Age of First Inter. ^a	0 - > 18	16.78	1.92	15.96	1.89	15.22	2.17	4.22	.0152	8.43	.0039
Level/Sex. Intimacy	1 - 3	2.81	0.42	2.92	0.28	2.91	0.36	3.20	.0416	5.30	.0217
Exp. Phys. Abuse ^a	0 - > 11	0.74	0.70	1.00	0.90	1.28	1.04	3.03	.0493	6.05	.0142
Trust Others	1 - 5	2.20	0.90	2.44	0.97	2.41	0.90	3.16	.0432	5.07	.0248
Strictness	1 - 5	3.24	0.85	3.11	0.79	3.00	0.78	2.13	.1197	4.25	.0396
Make Friends	1 - 5	1.80	0.77	1.94	0.91	1.98	0.90	1.67	.1885	3.14	.0771
Exc. Punishment	0 - > 11	2.11	0.97	2.18	0.93	2.27	0.95	0.63	.5347	1.24	.2658
Step-parent	1 - 3	1.26	0.51	1.29	0.50	1.30	0.46	0.15	.8576	0.03	.5871
Function 2											
Hometown Pop.	1 - 9	4.93	1.44	4.85	1.23	5.36	1.78	2.08	.1259	1.78	.1829
Family Income	1 - 5	3.96	1.04	3.93	1.13	4.23	0.86	1.41	.2441	1.43	.2321
Age		20.32	2.99	20.83	3.76	20.30	1.84	1.02	.3605	0.40	.5263
Maint. Relationships	1 - 5	2.21	1.02	2.43	1.14	2.34	1.01	1.74	.1761	2.27	.1328
Closeness to Women	1 - 5	2.34	0.92	2.54	1.00	2.45	1.02	1.57	.2087	1.99	.1593
Obs. Phys. Abuse ^a	0 - > 11	0.22	0.44	0.26	0.46	0.18	0.36	0.13	.8772	0.004	.9524

^aItem response in categorized ranges; converted for reporting purposes.

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