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A Comparison of Men Who Committed Different Types of Sexual Assault in a Community Sample

Antonia Abbey,

Wayne State University

Michele R. Parkhill,

Wayne State University

A. Monique Clinton-Sherrod, and

Research Triangle Institute

Tina Zawacki

University of Texas at San Antonio

Abstract

This study extends past research by examining predictors of different types of sexual assault perpetration in a community sample. Computer-assisted self-interviews were conducted with a representative sample of 163 men in one large urban community. As hypothesized, many variables that are significant predictors of sexual assault perpetration in college student samples were also significant predictors in this sample, including empathy, adult attachment, attitudes about casual sex, sexual dominance, alcohol consumption in sexual situations, and peer approval of forced sex. For most measures, the strongest differences were between nonassaulters and men who committed acts that met standard legal definitions of rape. Men who committed forced sexual contact and verbal coercion tended to have scores that fell in between those of the other two groups. The implications of these findings are discussed for community-based sexual assault prevention programs.

Keywords

sexual assault; perpetration; etiology; community

Only a handful of researchers have examined the predictors of sexual assault perpetration in community samples. Calhoun, Bernat, Clum, and Frame (1997) asked 65 young male residents of a Southern rural community who had been in an earlier study to complete their survey. Delinquency, hostility toward women, anger, dating frequency, alcohol consumption on dates, and sexual promiscuity were included as potential predictors of sexual assault perpetration. Hostility toward women and delinquency were the only two variables that significantly correlated with perpetration, and delinquency was the only significant predictor

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Please address correspondence regarding this article to Antonia Abbey, Department of Psychology, Wayne State University, 5057 Woodward, 7th floor, Detroit, MI, 48202; aabbey@wayne.edu.

in multiple regression analyses. Senn, Desmarais, Verberg, and Wood (2000) conducted a mail survey with 195 male residents of a small Canadian city. Childhood abuse, adolescent peer pressure, adolescent promiscuity, hostility toward women, rape myth acceptance, discomfort expressing emotions with women, age, and social desirability were included as predictors in logistic regression analyses to distinguish between perpetrators and nonperpetrators. Adolescent promiscuity and discomfort expressing emotions with women were the only significant predictors. Knight and Sims-Knight (2003) surveyed 168 men who were members of a civic and social club in Philadelphia. In structural equation analyses, juvenile delinquency and aggressive sexual fantasies had significant direct effects on sexual assault perpetration.

In contrast to the limited number of community surveys, there are numerous surveys of male college students who report that they have forced some type of unwanted sex on a woman. As compared to nonperpetrators, college student perpetrators have lower empathy, lower adult attachment, more hostility toward women, stronger sexual dominance motives, more delinquency in adolescence, peers who have more favorable views about forced sex, more frequent dating and sexual experiences, and more heavy drinking in dating and sexual situations (Abbey & McAuslan, 2004; Abbey, McAuslan, Zawacki, Clinton, & Buck, 2001; Carr & VanDeusen, 2004; Dean & Malamuth, 1997; Kosson, Kelly, & White, 1997; Lisak & Roth, 1988; Malamuth, Sockloskie, Koss, & Tanaka, 1991; Smallbone & Dadds, 2001; Wheeler, George, & Dahl, 2002; Zawacki, Abbey, Buck, McAuslan, & Clinton-Sherrod, 2003).

Overview of Study's Goals and Hypotheses

This study had two primary goals. The first was to examine the extent to which common predictors of college students' sexual assault perpetration also predicted sexual assault in a community sample. Like other theorists, we presume that motives for sexual assault differ across perpetrators and that for most perpetrators, multiple factors must converge for sexual assault to occur (Malamuth et al., 1991; Prentky & Knight, 1991). Thus, the predictors which were included spanned different hypothesized motives for sexual assault, including individual difference characteristics, attitudes about women, consensual sexual behavior, peer norms, and alcohol consumption. Overall, we anticipated that similar relationships would be found in this community sample as had been found in college student samples, with perpetrators having more extreme scores than nonperpetrators.

Most of the studies reviewed above used Koss, Gidycz, and Wisniewski's (1987) Sexual Experiences Survey (SES) to assess self-reported sexual assault perpetration in adolescence and adulthood. This measure is structured so that it moves from less severe to more severe incidents, beginning with forced sexual contact (without penetration), then verbally coercive strategies to obtain sex, and finally the use of physical force or intoxicants to obtain oral, anal, or vaginal sex. Only a few authors have tried to determine if men who commit different types of sexual assault differ in their beliefs or past experiences. Koss, Leonard, Beezley, and Oros (1985) found that as compared to nonperpetrators and verbal coercers, college men who had used physical force to obtain sex had stronger rape supportive attitudes. In contrast, Tyler, Hoyt, and Whitbeck (1998) found that attitudes about rape and

fraternity membership predicted college men's likelihood of using either verbal coercion or physical force to obtain sex. Distinctions between subgroups of perpetrators were not examined in past community-based studies (Calhoun et al., 1997; Senn et al., 2000).

Thus, the second goal of this study was to examine differences between men who committed acts that met standard legal definitions of attempted or completed rape, men who used verbal coercion to obtain sexual intercourse, men who forced sexual activities that did not involve penetration, and men who did not commit any type of sexual assault. It is reprehensible to use intentionally any type of verbal or physical means to obtain sex from someone who is unwilling; however, men who use physical force or take advantage of an incapacitated woman are demonstrating their extreme disregard for women and social norms. Thus, we hypothesized that men who have committed attempted or completed rape would have the most extreme scores on risk factors, men who did not commit any type of sexual assault would have the least extreme scores, and men who committed verbal coercion or forced sexual contact would have intermediate scores.

Method

Participants

Interviews were completed with 163 single men between the ages of 18 and 49. Fifty-four percent of participants were African American ($n = 88$) and 46% were Caucasian ($n = 75$). Ninety-five percent of participants had at least a high school education.

Procedure

This study's procedures are described in detail in another publication (Abbey, Parkhill, BeShears, Clinton-Sherrod, & Zawacki, 2006); thus, only a summary is provided here. African American and Caucasian men living in the Detroit Metropolitan area were contacted through random digit dialing, and exchanges were oversampled in communities with large numbers of African Americans. Potential participants were told that a study was being conducted on single men's good and bad dating experiences and that they would be paid \$50 if they were eligible and participated in a 90-minute survey in their home or another mutually agreeable location. Among individuals who met the eligibility criteria, 81.7% completed an interview.

Computer-assisted self-interviews (CASI) were used. After reviewing the consent form with participants, interviewers trained them to use the laptop computer by guiding them through a series of sample questions. Interviewers then positioned themselves far enough away so that they could not see the computer screen but could provide assistance if necessary.

Measures

Sexual assault perpetration—Sexual assault perpetration was measured by a 17-item modified version of the SES (Koss, personal communication, 2000; Kosson et al., 1997). An additional verbal coercion tactic was included which asked about using displeasure (e.g., sulking, making her feel guilty, swearing, getting angry, threatening to end the relationship) to obtain sex when they knew the woman did not want it. Additional rape items assessed

sexual intercourse when the woman was incapacitated and unable to give consent, and a final question that specifically used the word *rape* (Abbey, McAuslan, & Ross, 1998; Koss & Oros, 1982). The original SES includes only one question about sex acts (oral sex, anal sex, and penetration by an object through the use of force); however, this modified measure included additional questions about sex acts achieved through other tactics. The Cronbach coefficient alpha in this study was .88.

Empathy—Empathy was measured with two subscales from Davis's (1980) Empathy measure (perspective-taking and empathic concern). A sample item is, "Other people's misfortunes do not usually disturb me a great deal" (reversed). Responses were made on 5-point scales with options ranging from *does not describe me well* to *describes me well*. Cronbach's coefficient alpha was .84.

Attachment—Adult attachment was measured using six items from Collins and Read's (1990) Adult Attachment measure (depend and close subscales). A sample item is, "I find it difficult to allow myself to depend on others" (reversed). Responses were made on 5-point scales with options ranging from *not at all like me* to *exactly like me*. Cronbach's coefficient alpha was .80.

Delinquency—Participants were asked to report how many times they had engaged in 14 delinquent behaviors before the age of 18 (Jessor, Graves, & Hanson, 1968; Tremblay, Pagani-Kurtz, Masse, Vitaro, & Pihl, 1995). Sample items include getting into fights and trespassing. Responses were made on 6-point scales with options ranging from *zero times* to *more than five times*. Cronbach's coefficient alpha was .85.

Expectations about when sexual activities should occur—Participants' expectations regarding when to engage in sexual activities within a dating relationship were examined with three questions developed by the research team. Participants were asked when they expected to engage in light kissing, passionate kissing, and sexual intercourse. Responses were made on 6-point scales with options that ranged from *first date* to *marriage*. Cronbach's coefficient alpha was .74.

Attitudes about casual sex—Participants' attitudes toward casual sex were evaluated with four items from a longer measure developed by Hendrick and Hendrick (1987). A sample item is, "Sex without love is OK." Responses were made on 7-point Likert scales with options that ranged from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. Cronbach's coefficient alpha was .76.

Hostility toward women—Lonsway and Fitzgerald's (1995) 10-item measure of hostility toward women was included. A sample item is, "I feel that many times, women flirt with men just to tease them or hurt them." Responses were made on 7-point Likert scales with options that ranged from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. Cronbach's coefficient alpha was .82.

Sexual dominance—The power subscale of Nelson's (1979) Sexual Dominance measure was used to assess dominance as a motive for having sex. A sample item is, "I have sexual

relations because I like the feeling of having another person submit to me.” Responses were made on 4-point scales with options that ranged from *not important at all* to *very important*. Cronbach’s alpha for this 8-item measure was .90.

Alcohol consumption—Frequency of alcohol consumption in sexual situations was assessed with a question that read, “How often do you typically drink on occasions when you have consensual sex?” (Abbey et al., 1998). Responses were made on a 6-point scale with options ranging from *never* to *nearly every time*.

Peer approval of unwanted sex—Participants were asked what percentage of their male friends approved of obtaining unwanted sex through lies, guilt, or force to assess peer approval of forced sex (Boeringer, Shehan, & Akers, 1991; Malamuth, 1989). Responses could range from 0% to 100%. Cronbach’s coefficient alpha was .79.

Results

Prevalence of Sexual Assault Perpetration

Thirty-six percent of participants reported that they had not committed any type of sexual assault since the age of 14. The most serious type of sexual assault committed by 15% ($n = 24$) of the sample was forced sexual contact, 24.5% ($n = 40$) had committed verbally coerced sexual intercourse, and 24.5% ($n = 40$) had committed attempted or completed rape. Among those participants who had committed at least one sexual assault, 60% reported that they committed multiple assaults ($Mdn = 3$).

Comparison of Different Subgroups of Perpetrators Through Discriminant Function Analysis

Simultaneous entry discriminant function analysis (DFA) was used to compare nonassaulters, men who committed forced sexual contact, verbal coercers, and rapists. As is recommended (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001), the DFA took into account the prior probabilities of group membership described in the previous section. One significant discriminant function emerged with a Wilks’s lambda of .67, $\chi^2(27, N = 163) = 62.86, p < .001$. Correlations between the predictor variables and the function can be seen in Table 1.

To assess how well this set of predictors discriminated between groups, classification rates were examined (Klecka, 1980). A z test of proportions was computed to determine if the percentage of cases correctly classified significantly exceeded the percentage of cases that would have been classified by chance alone. Overall, 49.7% of participants were correctly classified, which significantly improved upon a chance rate of 27.3%, $z(163) = 6.42, p < .001$. Examination of the pattern of classification indicated that this set of predictor variables was most successful in identifying men who had not committed sexual assault (72.9% correctly identified) and men who committed rape (62.5% correctly identified). Only 12.5% of the men who committed forced contact were correctly identified, with 50% assigned to the no assault group and 20.8% assigned to the rape group. Twenty-five percent of the verbal coercers were correctly identified, with 50% assigned to the no assault group and 22.5% assigned to the rape group.

Mean Differences Between Perpetration Groups

Mean differences between perpetration groups on the predictor variables were examined to enhance interpretation of the DFA results (Klecka, 1980). A multivariate analysis of variance which included all the predictor variables in Table 1 was significant, $F(27, 459) = 2.35, p < .001$. Analyses of variance were then conducted for each predictor variable. As can be seen in Table 1, there were significant differences between nonassaulters' and rapists' scores on most of the measures. As compared to nonassaulters, rapists had lower empathy, lower adult attachment, higher expectations for having sex early in a relationship, more positive attitudes about casual sex, stronger sexual dominance motives, more frequent alcohol consumption in sexual situations, and peers who more strongly approved of forced sex. For most of these variables, men who committed forced sexual contact or verbal coercion had scores that fell between those of the other two groups. Verbal coercers' scores were significantly different from nonassaulters' scores on two variables. As compared to nonassaulters, verbal coercers had lower adult attachment and higher peer approval of forced sex. Contacters' scores significantly differed from rapists' scores on one variable. As compared to contacters, rapists had more positive attitudes toward casual sex. There were no significant differences between any of the groups in delinquency or hostility toward women.

Discussion

Rates of self-reported sexual assault perpetration were extremely high in this community sample. Almost a quarter of these men reported that they had committed an act since the age of 14 that appeared to meet standard legal definitions of attempted or completed rape. As has been noted in past reviews of this literature, self-reports of sexual assault victimization and perpetration vary dramatically based on the precise questions asked (Abbey, Parkhill, & Koss, 2005; Fisher & Cullen, 2000; Lynch, 1996). This study used an expanded version of the SES that included one additional verbally coercive tactic (swearing, getting angry, threatening to end the relationship) and one additional rape tactic (when the woman was incapacitated and unable to give consent). Also, in the original SES, forced sex acts were assessed with a single question (use of force), whereas in this version they were assessed with several questions which included multiple tactics. Providing more examples of types of forced sex may aid recall and willingness to disclose past forced sexual experiences. The use of CASI may also have contributed to the high rates of self-reported perpetration. CASI has been found to increase rates of disclosure of embarrassing and illegal behavior (Turner et al., 1998). Additional methodological research is needed to systematically evaluate the effects of the number of questions and data collection strategy on individuals' willingness to acknowledge sexual assault perpetration. It is important to note that the SES does not provide enough information to definitively determine if these acts would meet the legal definition of rape or another form of criminal sexual conduct in the jurisdictions in which they occurred. What is important is that these men acknowledged that they forced some type of sex on an unwilling woman.

Overall, the study's hypotheses regarding predictors of perpetration were supported. Rapists' scores significantly differed from those of nonperpetrators on many of the variables that have distinguished college perpetrators from nonperpetrators. As compared to

nonassaulters, rapists were lower in empathy and adult attachment. Rapists had expectations for sex at an earlier stage in a relationship and more casual attitudes about sex. Rapists also were more motivated to have sex as a means of achieving power over women, more frequently consumed alcohol in sexual situations, and reported greater peer approval of forcing sex on women.

Differences were not found between groups in hostility toward women. Although it is a common predictor of perpetration in college samples, hostility toward women was not a significant multivariate predictor of perpetration in past community studies (Calhoun et al., 1997; Senn et al., 2000). This suggests that hostility toward women may be a less relevant predictor of sexual assault in noncollege samples. On some college campuses, particularly those with many fraternities, men who are hostile toward women and view them as sexual commodities can band together and reinforce these shared beliefs in insular social groups. This is less likely in community environments. Research is needed that follows young men with extremely hostile attitudes toward women over time to determine if these views moderate with age or if these individuals continue to find peers who reinforce and encourage these beliefs.

Adolescent delinquency was not a significant predictor of sexual assault perpetration in this study. There is debate among theorists regarding the extent to which the sexual assault perpetrators identified in nonincarcerated samples such as this one are generalists who engage in a wide range of antisocial and delinquent acts or if they are specialists whose antisocial behavior is focused in the sexual domain (Lalumière, Harris, Quinsey, & Rice, 2005; Malamuth, 2003). Seto and Barbaree (1997) suggest that there are two developmental pathways which sexually aggressive men follow. Early onset perpetrators have psychopathic personality traits and a history of antisocial behavior beginning in childhood. Late onset perpetrators tend to be more opportunistic in their sexually aggressive behavior, using sexually coercive tactics on dates and acquaintances in adolescence and young adulthood. Although they acknowledged that empirical research is needed to evaluate their hypotheses, Seto and Barbaree (1997) argue that the opportunistic group is responsible for most sexual assaults that are not reported to the authorities. Despite the appeal of this dichotomy, delinquency was a significant predictor of sexual assault perpetration in two previous community studies (Calhoun et al., 1997; Knight & Sims-Knight, 2003), as well as in a number of college studies (Malamuth et al., 1991; Zawacki et al., 2003). Different measures of delinquency were used in each of these studies; therefore, they may have assessed events that differed in scope or severity. Also as noted earlier, there is a great deal of heterogeneity among sexual assault perpetrators; thus, any one sample may include men with somewhat different constellations of motives. To address Seto and Barbaree's supposition, future research with nonincarcerated samples needs to follow participants through adolescence and young adulthood and include measures of a broad range of delinquent and antisocial behaviors.

Although most of the significant differences were found between rapists and nonassaulters, several involved other types of sexual assault perpetration. For adult attachment and peer approval of forced sex, verbal coercers, like rapists, had scores that were significantly different from those of nonassaulters. Researchers have theorized that men who use verbal

strategies to obtain sex from women may be particularly socially skilled, although empirical evidence has been mixed (Koss et al., 1985; Muehlenhard & Falcon, 1990). These findings suggest that verbal coercers have trouble forming attachments and feel pressured by their peers to have sex.

Men who committed forced sexual contact typically had scores that fell between those of nonassaulters and rapists but were not significantly different from those of men in any other group. Overall, these predictors did an excellent job of identifying rapists and nonassaulters; however, they did a poor job of identifying men who had committed sexual contact and sexual coercion. There needs to be a greater focus on developing theories that help explain differences between men who commit the most extreme acts of sexual assault and men who commit less extreme forms. In some cases, men who have committed verbal coercion or forced sexual contact may not have had the opportunity to commit rape, but have no compunctions against doing so. In other cases, men who have committed verbal coercion or forced sexual contact may “draw the line” against using physical force or intoxication to obtain intercourse. Qualitative research with men who have committed different types of sexual assault would help explain their different motivations.

Limitations

Participants in this study were single African American and Caucasian adult men. This is an appropriate sample in which to examine the predictors of acquaintance sexual assault; however, it is important to include individuals from other ethnic minority groups in future research. Studies with larger sample sizes are also needed so that more fine-grained analyses can be conducted comparing men who have committed different types of sexual assault across a broad range of measures. Prospective studies are also needed that follow adolescents into adulthood to examine the temporal relationships between these concepts.

Implications

Overall, the strongest and most consistent differences were found between rapists and nonassaulters. This finding suggests that the questions which assess rape on self-report measures such as the SES are tapping qualitatively different acts than the questions which assess verbal coercion and forced sexual contact. It is reasonable that men who acknowledge that they were willing to use physical force to have penetrative sex with an unwilling woman or to have sex with a woman too incapacitated to give consent would exhibit the most deviant personality characteristics and attitudes. In this study, many of the differences were in the sexual domain, with rapists having more positive attitudes toward casual sexual relationships, viewing sex as a means of achieving power over women, and having peers who approve of forced sex. These findings suggest that treatment programs need to focus on these men’s inability to establish close, caring relationships with women, their perceptions of sex as a domain in which they can exert power over women, their heavy alcohol consumption in sexual situations, and their friendships with other men that encourage these behaviors. Universal prevention programs are needed for male adolescents and young adults (Berkowitz, 2002). Mentors of young men in schools, sports teams, and other youth groups need to establish a social climate in which traditional views of masculinity are challenged, women are respected, and forced sex is not tolerated.

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Biographies

Antonia Abbey is a professor of psychology at Wayne State University. She received her PhD in social psychology from Northwestern University. Her research interests include

alcohol's role in sexual assault, sexual assault etiology and prevention, and young adults' risky sexual behavior.

Michele R. Parkhill is a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Washington. She received her PhD in social psychology from Wayne State University. Her research interests include alcohol's role in sexual assault and risky sexual behavior.

A. Monique Clinton-Sherrod, PhD, is a research psychologist at RTI and has extensive experience in prevention research associated with a variety of psychosocial issues. Her expertise includes the areas of intimate partner violence, childhood maltreatment, substance abuse prevention, and women's and minorities' health, with particular focus on evaluating the effectiveness of interventions at all levels. She has co-authored several journal articles for such publications as the *Journal of Substance Abuse*, *Journal of Primary Prevention*, *Journal of Black Psychology*, and the *Psychology of Women Quarterly*.

Tina Zawacki is an assistant professor in the Department of Psychology at the University of Texas at San Antonio. She received her PhD in social psychology from Wayne State University, and completed a postdoctoral fellowship in addictive behaviors at the University of Washington. Her research interests include the role of social drinking in health-related behaviors including sexual assault, sexual transmission of HIV, and drunk driving, as well as ethnic health disparities in HIV acquisition.

Table 1

Means, Standard Deviations, and Results of ANOVAs, and Discriminant Function Analysis That Distinguish Between Sexual Assault Perpetration Groups

	No Assault (<i>n</i> = 59)		Forced Contact (<i>n</i> = 24)		Verbal Coercion (<i>n</i> = 40)		Attempted/Completed Rape (<i>n</i> = 40)		Correlation With Function
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
Empathy	3.72 _a	0.64	3.40	0.67	3.49	0.58	3.29 _b	0.67	3.93**
Adult attachment	3.78 _a	0.85	3.34	0.66	3.36 _b	0.75	3.25 _b	0.82	4.56**
Delinquency	1.56	0.39	1.56	0.37	1.73	0.43	1.75	0.48	2.44
When expect sex in relationships	2.78 _a	0.88	2.69	0.94	2.53	0.83	2.16 _b	0.69	4.67**
Positive attitudes about casual sex	3.89 _a	1.51	3.95 _a	1.36	4.42	1.35	5.12 _b	1.38	6.64**
Hostility toward women	3.13	1.13	3.19	1.06	3.16	1.02	3.46	1.12	0.80
Sexual dominance motives	1.80 _a	0.76	1.98	0.76	1.88	0.62	2.25 _b	0.74	3.36*
Drinking in sexual situations	2.34 _a	1.16	2.99	1.72	2.66	1.18	3.14 _b	1.48	3.22*
Peer approval of forced sex	1.77 _a	1.25	1.93	1.28	2.98 _b	2.22	2.79 _b	2.10	5.12**

Note: Means in a row with different subscripts are significantly different from each other using Tukey92019's HSD post hoc test; $ps < .05$. Univariate $df = 3, 159$.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.