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EFFECT OF GENDER AND ETHNICITY ON SELF REPORTS OF MILD, MODERATE AND SEVERE SEXUAL COERCION

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The current study examines the influence of gender and ethnicity on various levels of sexual coercion among heterosexual partners. The *Revised Conflicts Tactics Scale* (Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy & Sugarman, 1996) was distributed to 452 southern California college students. ANOVA tests revealed a strong effect for gender. Males are more likely than females to report experiencing sexual coercion at mild, moderate and severe levels. The effect for ethnicity was minor.

Introduction

Since the late 1980s, research examining incidents of sexual coercion involving male and female heterosexual perpetrators has shown that women report higher rates of sexually coercive experiences than men (Hogben, Byrne & Hamburger, 1996; O'Sullivan & Byers, 1998; Poppen, & Segal, 1988; Struckman-Johnson, 1988). In fact, the conventional notion has been that only women experience and report sexual coercion by men. However recently published materials (e.g., Anderson & Struckman-Johnson, 1998; Fiebert, 2000) indicate that a surprising number of studies reveal that men also report sexual coercion by women. The percentage of men reporting victimization demonstrates that they, as well as women, experience significant levels of sexual coercion. In an

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attempt to enhance understanding of this phenomenon, several studies have expressly examined female-perpetrated heterosexual coercion (Anderson & Aymani, 1993; Fiebert & Tucci, 1998; Struckman & Johnson & Struckman-Johnson, 1994).

The percentage of men between the ages of 16–40 reporting female-perpetrated sexual coercion varies from 1% to 50% (Struckman-Johnson & Struckman-Johnson, 1998). Variation in reporting rates is due in part to an evolving conceptualization of the depth and scope of the construct, and the consequent refinement of measurement techniques. Some researchers define sexual coercion broadly, such as “sexual touch or intercourse involving pressure or force” (Struckman-Johnson & Struckman-Johnson, 1994). Others focus more narrowly, utilizing measurement techniques aimed at uncovering specific behaviors that vary in intensity (Fiebert & Tucci, 1998; Koss & Oros, 1982; Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy & Sugarman, 1996). Since some variation in reporting rates is bound to occur, careful attention must be paid to the scope of a study prior to interpreting and comparing results, especially because a broadly used sexual coercion scale has yet to be developed.

Although research efforts increasingly include female-perpetrated sexual coercion, the role of ethnicity has remained relatively unexamined. In the United States and especially in California, concern with issue of ethnicity and cultural identity has increased as demographics have changed. Therefore, in this study we have concentrated on the role of ethnicity as it may pertain. Only two studies have considered the role of ethnicity in sexual coercion. Kalof and Wade (1995) conducted a study examining both gender and ethnicity, looking at racial (Euro-American and African American) differences in sexual attitudes and experiences with sexual victimization. Consistent with the results of previous studies, Kalof and Wade found that women report higher rates of coercive experience than men. No significant differences were found between Euro-Americans and African Americans. Rouse (1988) examined self-reports of coercive experiences by American men and women of European, African & Latin-American descent. Results indicated that African American and

Euro-American men were more likely to report having experienced female-perpetrated sexual coercion than Latin American men and women.

The current study expands on previous efforts to examine the occurrence of varying degrees of sexual coercion among a group of heterosexual men and women. Additionally, this study includes comparisons of ethnicity, a relatively untapped yet potentially significant area. The sample of college-age students was used for accessibility and convenience. The similarity of their educational status and age may mitigate the issue of social class which was, therefore, not included as a factor.

Methods

Participants

Students at two southern California public colleges were surveyed during the fall (1998) and spring (1999) semesters. Approximately 94 percent of the sample was drawn from California State University at Long Beach, the remainder from El Camino College. Participants were primarily students in upper division social sciences courses. At the beginning of a class period, students were asked to respond voluntarily, anonymously, and confidentially to a survey regarding sexual coercion. After completing the survey, students placed their completed surveys in an unmarked envelope.

The total sample consisted of 259 females and 193 males. The female participants included 57 Asian Americans, 54 Latinas, 58 African Americans and 90 Euro-Americans. The male participants included 48 Asian Americans, 40 Latinos, 42 African Americans and 63 Euro-Americans. Ages ranged from 18–56 years with a mean of 24 years and a standard deviation of 5.88.

Materials

Based on a previous study of similar design (Fiebert & Tucci 1998), items assessing sexual coercion were drawn from the Revised Conflicts Tactics Scale (Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy &

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Sugarman 1996). The survey consisted of demographic information (gender, age, marital status and ethnicity), and the following twelve items. Note that items 4–9 and 11 combine three sexual acts (oral, anal, and genital) with three levels of coercion (insistence, threats of force, and use of force). Items 1–3 and 12 were included to assess milder forms of sexual coercion (kissing, touching, and forced dating). Item 10 was included to assess for the consequences of sexually coerced behavior.

1. I have gone out on a date with a man/woman because she made me feel I had to.
2. I have been forced by a man/woman to kiss him/her.
3. I have been forced by a man/woman to touch him/her sexually.
4. A man/woman has insisted, without using physical force, that I have sex with him/her even though I didn't want to.
5. A man/woman has made me have sex with him/her without a condom.
6. A man/woman has insisted, without using physical force, that I have oral or anal sex with him/her.
7. I have had sex with a man/woman because he/she threatened me in some way.
8. I had sex with a man/woman because he/she used some type of physical force such as holding down, hitting, hair pulling, biting.
9. A man/woman has threatened me in order to get me to have oral or anal sex with him/her.
10. After having sex with a man/woman, I have felt sexually taken advantage of.
11. I had oral or anal sex with a man/woman because he/she used some type of force such as holding down, hitting, hair pulling, biting.
12. A man/woman has sexually touched my body when I did not want him/her to.

Results

The percentage of positive responses for each of the twelve items for the gender factor is found in Table 1. A higher percentage of males than females reported having experienced sexual coercion on all items assessing mild, moderate and severe sexual coercion. A higher percentage of females than males responded affirmatively on item 10, the item assessing the affective conse-

Table 1
Percentage of Positive Responses by Gender on Items 1–12

Item	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Males	29	35	23	27	24	18	10	6	7	14	5	42
Females	13	19	14	23	12	15	4	5	3	27	2	38

quences of having experienced sexual coercion. Further analyses reveal that several of these differences reach significance. Additionally, significant effects for ethnicity were found at mild and severe levels.

A 2 x 4 (gender x ethnicity) ANOVA was performed for each of the twelve items. Significant results of ANOVA tests are summarized in Table 2. Means for significant main effects are listed in Table 3.

Examination of the means reveals that a significantly greater percentage of males report sexual coercion on items 1–3, 5, 7 and 9. This pattern was reversed only for item 10, indicating a significantly greater percentage of females report suffering negative consequences as a result of experiencing sexual coercion.

Bonferroni multiple comparison procedures were run on items 2 and 9 to differentiate significant effects among the four levels of ethnicity. A significant difference was found for item 9, indicating the experience of threats to obtain oral or anal sex. Differences were greatest between African Americans and Euro-Americans, $M = .022$, $SD = .017$ and $M = .097$, $SD = .021$, respectively, $p < .05$.

Interaction effects for items 8 and 11 reveal that fewer Euro-American and Latino males reported physically forced sex than

Table 2
Analysis of Variance for Items Reaching Significance

Source	df	$F_{\text{—}}$										
		1	2	3	5	7	8	9	10	11		
Gender (G)	1	16.9**	15.8**	7.1**	10.3**	8.1**			6.0**	9.1**		
Ethnicity (E)	3		3.2*						3.0*			3.4*
G x E	3						3.3*					3.2*

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

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Table 3
Means for Significant Main Effects

<i>Items</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>7</i>	<i>9</i>	<i>10</i>
Gender							
Males							
<i>M</i>	.284	.337	.236	.235	.099	.072	.138
<i>SD</i>	.029	.031	.028	.027	.017	.015	.030
Females							
<i>M</i>	.127	.172	.136	.120	.033	.025	.257
<i>SD</i>	.025	.027	.024	.023	.015	.013	.026
<i>Items</i>		<i>2</i>	<i>9</i>	<i>11</i>			
Ethnicity							
Euro-American							
<i>M</i>		.355	.022	.025			
<i>SD</i>		.035	.017	.015			
African American							
<i>M</i>		.224	.097	.080			
<i>SD</i>		.043	.020	.019			
Latino/a							
<i>M</i>		.218	.034	.000			
<i>SD</i>		.044	.021	.019			
Asian American							
<i>M</i>		.2231	.040	.049			
<i>SD</i>		.042	.020	.018			

their female ethnic counterparts. Conversely, more African American and Asian American males reported physically forced sex than their female ethnic counterparts. Additionally, African American and Asian American males report more physically forced oral and anal sex than their female counterparts. Euro-American males report slightly less physically forced oral and anal sex than their female ethnic counterparts. Latino/a males and females report a similar percentage of physically forced oral and anal sex.

Discussion

The results of this study provide additional data which challenge the notion that men report a lower occurrence of sexual coercion than women. In this sample of southern California col-

lege students, men reported a higher occurrence of sexual coercion on a continuum representing mild, moderate and severe levels. Differences on non-significant items reflected this trend as well. However, when it comes to reporting the consequences that result from experiencing sexual coercion, a higher percentage of women reported suffering negative feelings of victimization. Careful consideration of social factors merits at least two plausible explanations for the differences found on item 10. Traditionally, sexual scripts for men and women differ. Men are socialized to actively seek sexual opportunity while women are socialized to selectively engage in or avoid sexual opportunity (Byers & O'Sullivan 1998). Because social roles for men dictate that men should be sexual opportunists, men may not experience negative consequences as a result of sexual victimization. On the other hand, men may be unwilling or unable to suffer an emotional insult that may threaten their self image as consistent with their sexual script. Because women's sexual script dictates sexual selectivity, the experience of emotional insult as a result of sexual victimization poses little threat to a woman's self image, consistent with the traditional sexual script.

What might account for the disparity between the current findings that reveal greater male victimization and the findings of prior work in the field? One possible explanation may be that ambiguity in measurement techniques permit men to report according to their perceptions of their required social role than accurately. Because there is little room in the current scale for ambiguity, men may be less likely to dismiss or ignore a sexually coercive experience. The scale used in the current investigation was designed to include a wide array of sexually coercive behaviors while also detailing physical and nonphysical experiences that it attempts to measure.

It is apparent that over the past decades cultural changes in sexual mores and behavior have occurred. The pervasive portrayal in the media of sexuality, along with the effects of feminist challenges to assumptions of male power and privilege are likely to have encouraged a cohort of college-age women to express their sexuality assertively. Such sexual assertiveness may be expressed

by some women as clear coercive behaviors. However, a woman's sexual assertiveness may be perceived by another as too bold, inappropriate for a traditional feminine role, and therefore reported as sexually coercive.

In the present investigation the role of ethnicity appears to play a minor role. Specifically, African Americans are more likely than Euro-Americans to feel forced or pressured to engage in oral or anal sex. Combined, gender and ethnicity do show some influence on severe sexual coercion. European American and Latino males were less likely than their female ethnic counterparts to experience physically forced sex. Conversely, African American and Asian American males were more likely than their female ethnic counterparts to experience physically forced sex. Additionally, African American and Asian American males were more likely than their female ethnic counterparts to report having experienced physically forced oral or anal sex. European American males were slightly less likely than European American females to report on this, and Latino/as reported similarly.

Clearly, the effect of ethnicity is not as easily interpretable as that of gender. It is difficult to speculate on factors contributing to the results because no clear trend emerges regarding differences based on ethnicity or ethnicity and gender combined. However, it may prove useful to pursue those differences that were discovered, as they may be indicative of a broader phenomenon. The finding that men report greater levels of sexual coercion than women deserves continued attention because it diverges from research trends and may reveal a phenomenon that has previously been undetected.

Notes

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2. Americans of European descent often referred to as Caucasians. The term is used to parallel references to the other groups under consideration.

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