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Ambiguous communication of sexual intentions as a risk marker of sexual aggression

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Abstract

Three studies are reported that explored the role of ambiguous communication of sexual intentions as a risk factor for sexual aggression and victimization. Two main forms of ambiguous communication were distinguished: token resistance (saying "no" when you mean "yes") and compliance (saying "yes" when you mean "no"). Two samples of heterosexual men and women and a sample of homosexual men with a total N of 1284 completed a measure of sexual victimization or aggression and indicated whether or not they had ever shown token resistance or compliance in a sexual encounter. Moreover, the heterosexual male respondents indicated whether they had ever perceived token resistance or compliance in a female partner. Logistic regression analyses revealed that the risk of experiencing sexual victimization was significantly increased as a function of token resistance. Two of the three studies also showed compliance to be a risk factor for sexual victimization. For the male respondents, token resistance was consistently linked to a higher likelihood of perpetrating sexually aggressive acts in the three studies. Perceived compliance was also found to increase the risk of sexual aggression in three out of four analyses. Support for a link between perceived token resistance and sexual aggression was found in the first study only. Overall, the findings suggest that the use of ambiguous communication in negotiating sexual encounters is associated with an increased risk of sexual victimization as well as perpetration of sexually aggressive acts, in both heterosexual and homosexual contacts. The implications of the findings are discussed with respect to the issue of rape prevention.

Ambiguous communication of sexual intentions
as a risk marker of sexual aggression

Sexual interactions are guided to a large extent by "sexual scripts", i.e. cognitive representations of the typical sequence of events in a sexual encounter which act as guidelines for an individual's expectations and behaviors in an actual dating situation (Metts & Spitzberg, 1996; Rose & Frieze, 1989, 1993). In the widely accepted "traditional sexual script", men are expected to make the first move in initiating sexual contact whereas women are cast in the role of gatekeepers of sexual intimacy (Byers, 1996; Carpenter, 1998; Goodchilds, Zellman, & Giarrusso, 1988). Being assigned the role of recipient of male sexual advances implies that it would be inappropriate for women to express in an explicit and unambiguous way their desire for sexual intimacy. As Harnish, Abbey, and DeBono (1990) pointed out, traditional sex role stereotypes expect women "to initially resist men's sexual advances even when they find them desirable and plan on reciprocating" (p. 1334). This role prescription is bound to create ambiguity in interpreting the meaning of a woman's rejection of a man's sexual advances: does it indicate genuine unwillingness or rather reflects a kind of "token resistance" waiting to be overcome by the man's persistent efforts? Enacting sexual scripts in an actual dating context is a communication process in which sexual interests are negotiated (Metts & Spitzberg, 1996). The traditional female script, which precludes the explicit communication of sexual interests, gives rise to ambiguity in this communication process: it may lead women to send out ambiguous messages as to their sexual intentions, and it may encourage men to think that a woman's rejection of their sexual advances indicates token resistance rather than genuine resistance.

The extent to which women use token resistance in sexual encounters, their reasons for employing this form of ambiguous communication, and the effect of token resistance on sexual coercion have been explored by a number of studies. Muehlenhard and Hollabaugh (1988) were the first to provide data on the prevalence of token resistance, on potential reasons for its use, and on the link between token resistance and a range of attitudes pertinent to sexual

interactions. Token resistance was defined by Muehlenhard and Hollabaugh as "a woman's indicating that she did not want to have sex even though she had every intention to and was willing to engage in sexual intercourse" (p. 872). They found that in their sample of 610 female psychology undergraduates, 40% reported having shown token resistance at least once. Similar prevalence rates were found in subsequent studies (Krahé, 1998; Muehlenhard & McCoy, 1991; O'Sullivan & Allgeier, 1994; Shotland & Hunter, 1995; Sprecher, Hatfield, Cortese, Potapova & Levitskaya, 1994, US sample).

Within the traditional sexual script, interaction goals and behavioral expectations are linked to script-consistent attitudes and cognitive appraisals. For example, Muehlenhard and Hollabaugh (1988) found that women who showed token resistance held more traditional sex role stereotypes, were more likely to accept interpersonal violence in relationships and were more ready to endorse the belief that women enjoy the use of coercion in sexual relationship. Thus, token resistance as a communicative strategy seems to be supported by an attitudinal background that is committed to the traditional sex role stereotype of men as initiators and women as recipients of sexual advances. In addition, there is evidence to show that men who believe that women use token resistance are more likely to hold rape-supportive attitudes than men who do not believe in token resistance. Similarly, Garcia (1998) found a link between belief in token resistance and rape myth acceptance in men. Another recent study (Osman & Davis, 1997) showed that men with a strong belief in token resistance were less likely to interpret a date rape scenario as "rape". They also paid less attention to verbal resistance by the female stimulusperson and more attention to nonverbal cues of availability than men who did not believe in token resistance.

Even though there is a sound database for linking the use of token resistance to the traditional sexual script for women, several studies demonstrated that token resistance is not limited to female courtship behavior. O'Sullivan and Allgeier (1994) as well as Sprecher et al. (1994) found that prevalence rates for token resistance were even higher for male respondents

(43% vs. 25% for women in O'Sullivan & Allgeier; 47% vs. 38% in Sprecher et al., US sample).

Moreover, token resistance is not the only form of ambiguous communication in negotiating sexual intimacy. Compliance, i.e. agreeing to sexual contacts without actually wanting them, is another type of sexual miscommunication closely linked to traditional sex role stereotypes. In the Shotland and Hunter (1995) study, 38% of the female respondents reported compliance.

O'Sullivan and Allgeier (1998) reported similar percentages of women and men who engaged in unwanted sexual contacts in the course of a two-week period. Finally, Sprecher et al. (1994) found prevalence rates of 55% percent for their female and 35% for their male respondents in the US. (Interestingly, this gender ratio was reversed in their Japanese and Russian samples, where compliance rates were higher for men than for women). Parallel to their findings on token resistance, Shotland and Hunter showed that women's compliance was also linked to an increased probability of experiencing sexual aggression. Byers (1996, p.21) pointed out that the traditional sexual script expects women "to behave unassertively with men", which makes them vulnerable to sexual victimization.

Thus, the available evidence suggests that both token resistance and compliance are frequently employed by both sexes in the negotiation of sexual intimacy. What is less clear at present is whether they have potentially negative effects on sexual relationships, in particular in terms of sexual victimization and the perpetration of sexual aggression. Muehlenhard and Hollabaugh (1988) concluded that token resistance is likely to imply negative consequences: it discourages honest communication, it makes women appear manipulative, and it encourages men to ignore women's refusals. Support for these concerns came from studies by Shotland and Hunter (1995) and Krahe (1998) showing that token resistance was associated with a higher likelihood of sexual victimization. However, this view was rejected by O'Sullivan and Allgeier (1994). In their study, the majority of both men and women indicating token resistance rated the interaction with their partners as moderately or extremely pleasant.

In this paper, three studies are presented that explored the link between ambiguous communication of sexual intentions on the one hand and sexual aggression as well as sexual victimization on the other. The first two studies investigated heterosexual aggression between male perpetrators and female victims. It was predicted that women using ambiguous communication in the form of either token resistance or compliance would be more likely to experience sexual victimization, i.e. unwanted sexual contacts. Men reporting token resistance were predicted to be more likely to use coercion to pursue their sexual intentions. This prediction was based on the reasoning that men who use token resistance believe that saying "no" to a sexual advance does not necessarily mean "no" and are therefore more likely to show sexual aggression. In addition, we examined the role of men's perceptions of their female partner's token resistant and compliant behaviors. If Muehlenhard and Hollabaugh (1988) are right in assuming that female use of token resistance encourages men to ignore a woman's refusals, then one should expect a link between perceived token resistance and sexual aggression in men. Generally, if men hold the view that women often conceal, or are dishonest about, their true intentions, they may be more likely to pursue their sexual interests ignoring female resistance. Therefore, we hypothesized that perceived compliance as well as perceived token resistance are associated with higher levels of sexual aggression.

The third study explored the link between ambiguous communication and sexual aggression in a sample of homosexual men. So far, token resistance and compliance have been studied exclusively in the context of heterosexual dating. However, negotiating sexual intimacy is no less important in homosexual interactions. Klinkenberg and Rose (1994) proposed that, because there is not a well defined cultural script for same-sex dating, "gay men and lesbians will have to draw on a heterosexual model to some extent in developing a variant cultural script." (p. 24). Their analysis of gay men's scripts for a typical first date supports the proposed overlap between heterosexual and homosexual scripts. Thus, we predicted that both token resistance and

compliance would be shown by a substantial proportion of homosexual men. Both strategies were expected to be linked to higher levels of sexual victimization and aggression.

Studies 1 and 2

Study 1 was designed to explore the link between ambiguous communication and sexual aggression as well as victimisation. Study 2 was conducted as a replication of the first study, using the same instruments. This replication was deemed necessary in view of the scarcity of comparable data on the relationship between ambiguous communication and sexual victimization from the international literature and the complete lack of studies using German samples. Because both studies used the same constructs and methodology, they are presented together to facilitate a comparative appraisal of the findings.

Method

Participants

Study 1. A total of 526 sexually experienced respondents participated in this study. Of these, 283 were female, with an average age of $M = 18.6$ years ($SD = 1.61$), and 243 were male, with an average age of $M = 18.5$ years ($SD = 1.70$). To ensure that adolescents from different walks of life were represented in the sample, respondents were approached in a variety of settings offering leisure activities to young people (cf. below). In terms of educational background, respondents were representative of the population of late adolescents in Berlin and Potsdam, Germany, where the study was conducted. As far as past sexual behavior is concerned, the sample is highly similar to the respondents of two representative nation-wide surveys with regard to the number of sexual partners, coital experience and age at first intercourse (Bundeszentrale für gesundheitliche Aufklärung [BZgA], 1995; 1996; 1998, Total $N = 4308$). For example, the percentage of female respondents reporting coital experience at age 17 was 61% in this sample and 65% in the BZgA (1998) survey. For male respondents, the corresponding figure was 61%, which was exactly the percentage identified in the BZgA survey. In terms of age at first intercourse and number of sexual partners, the present sample was equally similar to the two

representative samples (cf. Krahe, Scheinberger-Olwig & Waizenhöfer, 1999, for a detailed comparison).

Study 2. A new sample of 454 sexually experienced adolescents participated in this study. Of these, 173 were female with an average age of 18.0 years ($SD = 1.52$), and 281 were male, with an average age of 18.9 years ($SD = 1.79$). Again, the composition of the sample in terms of sexual background variables (age at first intercourse, number of sexual partners) was highly similar to the findings from two nationwide representative surveys (BZgA, 1995, 1998). The percentage of 17-year-olds with coital experience – which is an immediately comparable figure – was 64.2% for the female respondents. This figure corresponds to 61% in the BZgA survey. Similarly, 67.3% of all 17-year-old male respondents in this study reported coital experience, compared with 65% in the BZgA survey. In terms of educational background, the sample was again representative of the school population at large in Berlin and Potsdam.

Instruments and Procedure

Sexual aggression and victimization. To record unwanted sexual experiences, respondents received a German version of the Sexual Experiences Survey (SES; Koss & Oros, 1982; Koss, Gidycz & Wisniewski, 1987). The SES is widely used in North American research to elicit self-reports of sexual victimization (female version) and aggression (male version). It was shown to have good reliability and validity (Karabatsos, 1997; Koss & Gidycz, 1985).

The German SES consists of 12 items selected from the 1982 and 1987 versions of the SES (Koss & Oros, 1982; Koss et al., 1987). In keeping with the original SES, parallel versions were developed to address victimization (female respondents) and aggression (male respondents). The scale was developed on the basis of extensive piloting including a back translation. Care was taken to ensure that the wording of the translation remained as close as possible to the original but used a language acceptable to the target population of late adolescents. As in the original SES, responses to each item were made in a yes/no format. In addition, the revised German version asked respondents to break down their "yes" responses into

four types of victim-perpetrator relationships: (a) their (ex-) boyfriend/girlfriend; (b) a male/female friend or colleague at work; (c) a new acquaintance (e.g., in a disco); and (d) an unknown man/woman.¹ Multiple responses were possible for each SES item. The items and response format of the German SES are presented in Krahe, Reimer, Scheinberger-Olwig and Fritsche (1999). In terms of reliability, high levels of re-test stability were demonstrated for the German SES over a period of three to four weeks (cf. Krahe, Reimer, et al., 1999).

Ambiguous communication. To measure ambiguous communication, all respondents were asked to indicate whether or not they had ever shown token resistance. Furthermore, female respondents were asked whether or not they had ever shown compliance, and male respondents were asked whether or not they had ever perceived token resistance or compliance in a female partner.

The token resistance item, presented to all respondents, was taken from the study by Muehlenhard and Hollabaugh (1988). It read as follows (the wording for male respondents is given in parentheses): "Have you ever been in a situation where a man (a woman) wanted to have sexual contact with you, but you said 'no' even though you had every intention to and were willing to engage in sex with him (her)?" In short: "Have you ever said 'no' when you meant 'yes'?" Responses to this and all other ambiguous communication items were made in a dichotomous yes/no format. As in the Muehlenhard and Hollabaugh study, the meaning of the token resistance item was highlighted in an introductory paragraph setting token resistance against two other forms of communicating sexual intentions, i.e. saying "no" and meaning "no" and saying "no" and meaning "maybe".

Following the token resistance item, female respondents were asked to indicate whether or not they had ever shown compliance: "Have you ever been in a situation where a man wanted to have sexual contact with you and you said 'yes' even though you did not actually want to have sex with him? In short: Have you ever said 'yes' when you meant 'no'?" In Study 2, they were specifically instructed to report only those situations in which they had given in to a man's sexual

advances without the man using some means of force or coercion. The change was introduced after comments from respondents in Study 1 revealed that the original item did not make the distinction between compliance and sexual victimization sufficiently clear. The purpose of the new instruction was to avoid response redundancies which would lead to the same experience being listed both in the SES and in response to the compliance item.

Male respondents were presented with two further items following the token resistance question. The first addressed perceived token resistance:

"Have you ever been in the following situation: You show a woman that you want to have sex with her, and she says 'no' but you are convinced that actually she does want to have sex with you. In short: Has a woman ever said 'no' to you even though she meant 'yes'?"

The second item measured perceived compliance:

"Have you ever been in the following situation: You show a woman that you want to have sex with her, and she says 'yes' but you are convinced that actually she does not want to have sex with you. In short: Has a woman ever said 'yes' to you even though she meant 'no'?"

Data were collected in Berlin and Potsdam, Germany. Respondents were approached in a variety of settings frequented by adolescents (sport centres, youth clubs etc.) and asked to complete a survey on "adolescence and sexuality". The locations were chosen so that they provided the possibility for respondents to complete the questionnaire anonymously and individually in a quiet place. Respondents received a payment of 10 German Marks (approx. 5 US\$) for their participation. After completing the questionnaires, they were given the opportunity to ask questions about the research and were handed a list of local counseling agencies for victims and perpetrators of sexual assault.

Results

Prevalence of Ambiguous Communication

Study 1. Frequency analyses for the ambiguous communication items revealed that 51.6% of the female respondents reported token resistance and 33.2% reported compliance. The two

strategies were not significantly related, $\phi = .07$, n.s. Of the male respondents, 46.1% reported token resistance, 43.6% indicated that they had perceived token resistance in a female partner, and 21.4% reported perceived compliance. Token resistance did not correlate with either perceived token resistance or perceived compliance (ϕ 's $< .07$, n.s.) in the male sample. Perceived token resistance and perceived compliance were significantly, but moderately correlated ($\phi = .14$, $p < .05$).

Study 2: In the second study, 46.8% of the female respondents reported token resistance and 39.3% reported compliance. As in Study 1, the two strategies were not significantly correlated ($\phi = .14$, n.s.). Of the male respondents, 51.2% reported token resistance, 35.2% indicated that they had perceived token resistance in a female partner, and 26.0% reported perceived compliance. In the male sample, own token resistance was significantly, but moderately related to perceived token resistance in a female partner ($\phi = .22$, $p < .001$), but unrelated to perceived compliance ($\phi = .11$, n.s.). Perceived token resistance and perceived compliance were related at $\phi = .13$, $p < .05$.

Ambiguous Communication as a Predictor of Sexual Aggression and Victimization

Based on their responses to the Sexual Experiences Survey, respondents were assigned to one of three mutually exclusive groups of sexual victimization (female respondents) or aggression (male respondents). Each respondent was classified according to his/her most serious form of sexual aggression or victimization, following a standard procedure in research using the SES (e.g., Breitenbecher & Scarce, 1999; Gidycz, Coble, Latham, & Layman., 1993, Koss et al., 1987). The three groups were defined as follows:

- (1) No victimization/aggression (consensual sexual contacts only),
- (2) Moderate victimization/aggression (attempted sexual acts through use of force or exploitation of victim's incapacitated state; completed sexual acts through use of verbal pressure),
- (3) Severe victimization/aggression (completed sexual acts through use of force or exploitation of victim's incapacitated state).

The distribution of respondents across the three groups are shown in Table 1:

 Insert Table 1 about here

Stepwise logistic regression analyses using backward elimination were performed to examine the impact of ambiguous communication on (a) the sexual victimization of female respondents and (b) the perpetration of sexual aggression by male respondents (Menard, 1995). Two analyses were performed for each gender group in the two studies: (a) an analysis of the impact of token resistance and compliance in the "no victimization/aggression" group compared to the two other groups taken together (no vs. any victimization/aggression) and an analysis comparing the "no aggression/victimization" group against the severe victimization/aggression groups (no vs. severe victimization/aggression) (cf. Pan, Neidig & O'Leary, 1994, for a similar approach).

Sexual victimization

Study 1. The first analysis compared nonvictimized respondents to those who had experienced any form of sexual victimization (either moderate or severe) in a stepwise logistic regression analysis using token resistance, compliance, and the interaction between the two predictors as independent variables. The results showed a significant fit of the model, Model χ^2 (1, N = 275) = 15.52, p < .001, with only compliance as a significant predictor of victimization, B = 1.115, p < .001. Neither token resistance nor the interaction term were significant.

The second analysis compared respondents who reported no vs. severe victimization. This analysis also yielded a significant fit of the model that included token resistance (B = 0.658, p < .05) and compliance (B = 1.452, p < .001) as significant predictors, Model χ^2 (2, N = 181) = 26.04, p < .000. Again, the interaction was non-significant.

Table 2a presents the percentage of cases correctly classified and the odds ratios for the two predictors, token resistance and compliance. The odd ratios indicate the increase in probability that victimization will be reported as a function of each predictor. Thus, the odds

ratio of 3.05 for compliance in Study 1 indicates that the probability of reporting any sexual victimization is 3.05 times higher for respondents who showed compliance than for those who did not.

 Insert Table 2a about here

As the right-hand column of Table 2a reveals, the likelihood of experiencing severe victimization was increased by 1.93 as a function of token resistance and by 4.27 as a function of compliance. Almost two thirds of the cases were correctly classified by the model.

Study 2. Only the use of token resistance was associated with a significant increase in the odds ratios for sexual victimization in Study 2. The Model $\chi^2 (1, N = 158)$ was 6.23, $p < .05$, for the "none vs. any victimization" comparison and the Model $\chi^2 (1, N = 101)$ was 4.01, $p < .05$, for the "none vs. severe victimization" comparison. The corresponding unstandardized logistic regression coefficients for token resistance were $B = .838, p < .02$, and $B = .813, p < .05$, respectively.

As Table 2a reveals, female respondents in this sample who reported the use of token resistance were more than twice as likely to experience any sexual victimization and also more than twice as likely to experience severe victimization as women not reporting token resistance. Contrary to expectation, compliance was not associated with an increased risk of sexual victimization in this study. More than 63% of the female respondents were correctly classified in terms of their victimization status based on their responses to the token resistance and compliance questions.

Sexual aggression. Parallel analyses were conducted to examine the impact of token resistance, perceived token resistance, and perceived compliance on sexual aggression. The odds ratios and percentages of correct classifications for the "no vs. any aggression" comparison and the "no vs. severe aggression" comparison are displayed in Table 2b.

For Study 1, a significant model fit was obtained in both analyses. For the "none vs. any aggression" comparison, the Model χ^2 (3, $N = 225$) was 19.84, $p < .001$, with $B = .544$, $p < .05$ for token resistance, $B = .879$, $p < .01$ for perceived token resistance, and $B = .626$, $p < .05$ for perceived compliance. For the "no vs. severe" comparison, the Model χ^2 (2, $N = 142$) was 17.60, $p < .000$, with $B = .113$, $p < .05$, for token resistance, and $B = 1.48$, $p < .01$, for perceived token resistance.

Men who reported token resistance had a significantly higher likelihood of committing sexual aggression. They were 1.72 times more likely to show either moderate or severe sexual aggression and more than three times more likely to show severe sexual aggression than men who did not report token resistance. Perceived token resistance also featured as a significant risk factor for perpetrating sexually aggressive acts, with the risk of perpetrating any form of sexual aggression being 2.4 times greater and the risk of severe sexual aggression being 4.42 times greater than for respondents who did not report perceived token resistance. Finally, perceived compliance was found to be a risk factor for the combined sexual aggression measure, but failed to reach significance for the severe sexual aggression category. Just under two thirds of respondents were correctly classified as falling into the no vs. any sexual aggression categories, and over 80% were correctly classified into the no vs. severe sexual aggression categories on the basis of their ambiguous communication reports.

In Study 2, a model containing token resistance and perceived compliance as predictors of sexual aggression fitted the data best, with Model χ^2 (2, $N = 239$) = 31.74, $p < .001$ for the "none vs. any aggression" analysis and Model χ^2 (2, $N = 160$) = 15.04, $p < .000$ for the "none vs. severe aggression" analysis. The unstandardized logistic regression coefficients in the "none vs. any" analysis were $B = 1.20$, $p < .001$, for token resistance, and $B = 1.05$, $p < .001$, for perceived compliance. For the "non vs. severe" analysis, B was $.872$, $p < .05$ for token resistance and $B = 1.402$, $p < .001$, for perceived compliance.

Respondents who reported token resistance were 3.32 times more likely than respondents who did not report token resistance to show any form of sexual aggression and more than twice as likely to show severe sexual aggression. Perceived token resistance did not feature as a significant risk factor for perpetrating sexually aggressive acts in these analyses. However, perceived compliance was found in this sample of men to be a risk factor for (a) any form of sexual aggression, with an increase in odds of 2.86, and (b) severe sexual aggression, with an increase in odds of 4.06.

Just under two thirds of respondents in Study 2 were correctly classified as falling into the no vs. any sexual aggression categories, and over 80% were correctly classified into the no vs. severe sexual aggression categories on the basis of their ambiguous communication responses.

Discussion

The findings from Study 1 support the proposed role of ambiguous communication as a risk factor for both sexual victimization in women and sexual aggression in men. It was established that both token resistance and compliance are prevalent features in the courtship behavior of women as well as men. More than half of the female respondents reported the use of token resistance, and about a third reported compliance. Interestingly, the two strategies were found to be unrelated, suggesting that women who reported token resistance did not show compliance and vice versa. As predicted, both strategies were significantly related to higher levels of severe sexual victimization. In addition, compliance was found to be a risk factor for sexual victimization including moderate forms of sexual coercion. As far as the male respondents are concerned, almost half the sample reported the use of token resistance, a figure not much lower than that obtained for the female respondents. Engaging in token resistance was found to be associated with a significant increase in the likelihood of showing sexual aggression. Moreover, over 40% of the male respondents indicated that they had perceived token resistance in a female partner, and about one in five respondents had perceived compliance in a female partner. As predicted, both perceptions were related to higher odds for the perpetration of sexual aggression.

The findings from Study 2 corroborate the results of the previous study in most, if not all respects. First of all, it is important to note that the prevalence rates for the different measures of ambiguous communication were similar across the two studies. Thus, the conclusion that token resistance is a prevalent feature of both female and male courtship behavior and that a substantial proportion of men perceive token resistance in a female partner is supported by the findings of this study. Furthermore, about a third of female respondents in both studies reported compliance, and about a fifth of the male respondents reported perceived compliance.

As far as sexual victimization is concerned, Study 2 corroborates the significance of token resistance as a significant risk factor. In contrast, no support was found in this study for the proposed importance of compliance. In interpreting this findings, it should be noted that respondents in this study were instructed only to consider those experiences of unwanted sexual contact in which the man had not use any form of coercion. Given the failure to find a link between compliance and victimization using this more clear-cut operationalization of compliance, the possibility must be considered that the link found in Study 1 may have been spurious. Resulting from the same experience being reported in the SES and in response to the compliance item.

In the male sample, the impact of token resistance as a risk factor for sexual aggression was further substantiated. Additional support was also obtained for the proposed role of perceived compliance in predicting sexual aggression. Perceived token resistance, which was linked to an increased risk of sexual aggression in Study 1, did not appear as a significant risk factor in the present study. Altogether, the evidence from both studies suggests that ambiguous communication entails an increased risk of sexual aggression as well as victimization, with the most consistent findings emerging for the role of token resistance.

Study 3

The first two studies focused on the link between ambiguous communication and sexual violence in the context of heterosexual encounters. The third study was designed to

examine this link in homosexual relationships. The issue of sexual aggression among homosexual men has been addressed by very few studies. In Hickson's et al. (1994) sample of 930 homosexually active men, 27.6% reported that they had been subjected to unwanted sexual contact at some point in their lives. In a much smaller sample of 34 homosexual college students, Waterman, Dawson and Bologna (1989) identified a prevalence rate of 12.1%. Hodge and Canter (1998) looked at both heterosexual and homosexual victims of male sex offenders and found that assaults on homosexual victims tended to be more violent than those on heterosexual victims. These studies suggest that sexual aggression is a problem among homosexual men that needs to be recognized. Whereas some data are available on the prevalence of sexual aggression among homosexual men, the issue of potential risk factors of sexual aggression and victimization among homosexual men, including the role of ambiguous communication, has received no attention from sexual aggression researchers so far. Therefore, this study was conducted as a first step toward addressing the link between ambiguous communication and sexual aggression/victimization in homosexual men.

When studying male-on-male sexual aggression, it is important to recognize that respondents are approached as potential perpetrators, victims or both. Thus, a sexual aggression measure is required that records both victimization by and perpetration of sexual aggression (cf. Larimer, Lydum, Anderson, & Turner, 1999, for a similar approach with respect to heterosexual aggression). Especially when the aim is to examine possible risk factors of sexual aggression, it is important to identify the proportion of victims who are also perpetrators, and vice versa, to control for possible confounds due to the overlap of the two roles. A methodological problem that follows from these considerations is the possibility of carry-over effects from one perspective to the other. People who are first asked to report the perpetration of sexually aggressive acts may subsequently be more likely to report victimization experiences as a blame reduction strategy. Conversely, respondents who first identify themselves as victims may be less likely to admit afterwards that they have shown aggressive behavior themselves. To control for

this potential source of reporting bias, the present study employed two versions of the sexual aggression measure (cf. Method section), in which the order of presentation of the victimization and perpetration items was counterbalanced.

An additional issue arising from the fact that male respondents may feature in the roles of both victims and perpetrators of sexual aggression referred to the choice of ambiguous communication measures. Since token resistance was established in the first two studies as a risk factor for both victimization and perpetration, it was predicted that each of the two strategies of ambiguous communication would be associated with an increased risk of sexual victimization and sexual aggression. As in Studies 1 and 2, compliance was predicted to be a risk factor for sexual victimization only.

Method

Participants

A total of 310 men participated in this study. All respondents had experienced homosexual contacts. The average age of the sample was $M = 21.79$ years ($SD = 3.56$). The sexual orientation of the present sample was predominantly homosexual, with a mean score of $M = 1.71$ ($SD = .91$) on a seven-point self-rating scale ranging from (1) = homosexual to (7) = heterosexual. Respondents were members of the general public contacted in a variety of settings frequented by homosexual men. In terms of their educational background, the male sample, just like the two heterosexual samples, was representative of the general school leaving population in the city of Berlin where the study was conducted.

Instruments

Sexual aggression measure. To measure sexual aggression and victimization, an instrument called "Homosexual Experiences Survey" (HSES) was developed that used the "Sexual Experiences Survey" employed in Studies 1 and 2 as its point of departure. Since the SES is geared toward the measurement of heterosexual aggression, the majority of items refer to vaginal intercourse. These items had to be modified to reflect the different sexual practices

prevalent among homosexual men, such as oral and anal intercourse. Three different forms of coercing another person into sexual acts against his will are addressed in the HSES: (a) the use (or threat) of physical force, (b) the exploitation of another man's inability to resist unwanted sexual advances because he is in an incapacitated state; and (c) the use of verbal pressure. Each of the three forms of aggression is combined with four types of sexual acts: (a) touching; (b) masturbation; (c) oral sex; (d) anal sex. These four sexual acts were chosen on the basis of evidence on the predominant sexual practices of homosexual men (e.g. Bochow, 1997; Coxon, 1996). The total HSES consisted of six pages, three for each type of coercive strategies from the perpetrator and the victim perspective, respectively. The full text of the items and the response format are presented in Krahé, Schütze, Fritsche, and Waizenhöfer (in press).²To control for potential order effects in the presentation of the victimization and perpetration items, respectively, two versions of the HSES were created. Half of the respondents received the victimization items first, the second half received the perpetration items first.

Ambiguous communication measure. Two items tapping token resistance and compliance, respectively, were adapted from the items used in Studies 1 and 2. The token resistance item read as follows: "Have you ever been in a situation where a man wanted to have sexual contact with you, but you said 'no' even though you had every intention to and were willing to engage in sex with him?" In short: "Have you ever said 'no' when you meant 'yes'?" Responses were made in a dichotomous yes/no format.

Following the token resistance item, respondents were asked to indicate whether or not they had ever shown compliance: "Have you ever been in a situation where a man wanted to have sexual contact with you and you said 'yes' even though you did not actually want to have sex with him? In short: Have you ever said 'yes' when you meant 'no'?" Again, responses were recorded in a yes/no format.

Procedure

The survey was conducted in the city of Berlin, which has a large homosexual community. Using the same procedure adopted in the first two studies, respondents were approached in a variety of public places, including social clubs, different gay events, youth centers etc. According to a large-scale survey by Bochow (1997), the majority of homosexual men regularly visits such places. Locations frequented only for the sake of obtaining sexual contacts ("public sex environments", Coxon, 1996) were excluded from the range of data collection sites. Care was taken to ensure that respondents completed the questionnaire individually in a quiet place arranged in the respective settings. Respondents were paid 10 German Marks for their participation. After returning the questionnaires, all respondents received a list of local counseling agencies offering advice to victims and perpetrators of sexual violence.

Results

Prevalence of Ambiguous Communication

Frequency analyses for the ambiguous communication items revealed that 52.3%% of the respondents reported token resistance and 51.9% reported compliance. As in the two previous studies with heterosexual respondents, the two forms of ambiguous communication were not significantly related ($\phi = .03$, n.s.).

Ambiguous Communication and Sexual aggression/Victimization

The same classification as in the first two studies was used to assign respondents to one of three victimization categories and to one of three perpetration categories on the basis of their responses to the HSES. Prior to this classification, it was established through two loglinear analyses that the order of presentation of the victimization and perpetration items had no effect on the assignment of respondents to the three groups. As far as victimization experiences are concerned, 55.6% of respondents fell into the "no victimization" category, 17.0% were classified into the "moderate victimization" category, and 27.5% fell into the "severe victimization" category. In terms of the perpetration of sexual aggression, 71.1% were classified

into the "no aggression" category, 9.0% into the "moderate aggression" category, and 19.9% into the "severe aggression" category.

Paralleling the data analyses of Studies 1 and 2, a series of logistic regression analyses was performed to examine the impact of ambiguous communication on (a) sexual victimization and (b) the perpetration of sexual aggression among homosexual men. The first two analyses compared the "no victimization" group against the "moderate" and the "severe victimization" groups. In each of the two analyses, a model containing token resistance and compliance, but not their interaction, fitted the data best, with Model $\chi^2(2, N = 302) = 23.29, p < .000$, for the "none vs. any" comparison, and Model $\chi^2(2, N = 251) = 35.38, p < .000$, for the "none vs. severe" comparison. The unstandardized logistic regression coefficients were $B = .702, p < .01$ (none vs. any) and $B = 1.074, p < .001$ (none vs. severe) for token resistance, as well as $B = .903, p < .001$ (none vs. any) and $B = 1.321, p < .000$, for compliance.

The odds ratios for the risk of experiencing (a) any sexual victimization/aggression (either moderate or severe) and (b) severe victimization/aggression and the percentages of correct classification are presented in Table 3.

 Insert Table 3 about here

Table 3a shows that respondents who reported the use of token resistance were twice as likely to experience any sexual victimization and almost three times as likely to experience severe victimization compared to men not reporting token resistance. More than 63% of respondents in the "none vs. any" comparison were correctly classified, as were more than 71% in the "none vs. severe" comparison. Similarly, respondents reporting compliance were 2.48 times more likely to experience any sexual victimization and 3.75 times more likely to experience severe victimization compared to respondents who did not report this strategy. Here, the percentages of respondents correctly classified in the two analyses were 70.95 and 77.78, respectively.

The analyses referring to the perpetration of sexual aggression as the dependent variable showed that, as expected, only token resistance was significantly related to sexual aggression.

For the "none vs. any aggression" comparison, Model $\chi^2(1, N = 296)$ was 7.59, $p < .01$, with a B for token resistance of .719, $p < .01$. For the "none vs. severe" comparison, Model $\chi^2(1, N = 270)$ was 6.90, $p < .01$, with a B for token resistance of .778, $p < .01$.

Table 3b presents the odds ratios for the likelihood of committing sexual aggression. Respondents who reported token resistance were more than twice as likely to show any as well as severe sexual aggression. Compliance was not established as a significant risk factor for perpetrating sexually aggressive acts in the present analyses.

Discussion

The aim of Study 3 was to examine the role of ambiguous communication as a risk factor for sexual aggression and victimization in a sample of homosexual men. Overall, the findings show a high degree of convergence with the results from the two heterosexual samples. Token resistance was used by the present sample of homosexual men about as frequently as in the two previous samples of heterosexual men (52.2% vs. 46.1% in Study 1 and 50.5% in Study 2). Compliance was used more frequently by the male respondents in this study than by the female respondents in Studies 1 and 2 (51.9% vs. 33.2% in Study 1 and 39.3% in Study 2).

The findings from Study 3 underline the significance of both token resistance and compliance as risk factors of sexual victimization, extending the scope of the previous findings from female to male victims. Also paralleling the heterosexual findings, token resistance was found to be a risk factor for the commitment of sexually aggressive acts. Compliance was included in this study as a predictor of sexual victimization, not as a predictor of sexual aggression. Therefore, the absence of a link between compliance and the perpetration of sexual aggression was in line with the theoretical assumptions.

General Discussion

The purpose of the present research was to examine the role of ambiguous communication of sexual intentions as a risk factor for sexual aggression. Two forms of ambiguous communication were studied: token resistance ("saying 'no' when you mean 'yes'") and compliance ("saying 'yes' when you mean 'no'"). Previous research has shown that both strategies are used widely by women and men in negotiating sexual intimacy. This evidence received further support from the present data: About half of the respondents in each of the three studies reported that they had shown token resistance in the past, with figures for male and female respondents being remarkably similar. About a third of the two female samples and half of the homosexual male sample reported compliance, i.e. giving in to sexual advances without actually wanting sexual contact.

However, Muehlenhard and Rogers (1998) recently raised the possibility that the high prevalence rates of token resistance found across a range of studies may be reflect a misunderstanding between researchers and participants as to the exact definition of this behavior. They analyzed women's and men's free-response descriptions of token resistance episodes and found that only a small proportion of those descriptions conformed to the conceptual definition of token resistance endorsed by researchers. 67.7% of women and 82.5% of men described situations in which they thought they had shown token resistance. However, only 15.4% and 12.5% of these descriptions, respectively, held up to the authors' definition of token resistance in terms of saying no to sexual advances while at the same time intending to engage in sexual activity. These findings are potentially relevant to the prevalence data reported in the present studies, and indeed, in previous studies, including those by Muehlenhard and co-workers. While it is impossible to ascertain precisely how our respondents interpreted the token resistance item, it is important to note that our measure of token resistance differed in two ways from the approach adopted by Muehlenhard and Rogers (1998). First, we clarified the meaning of token resistance for the respondents by placing the token resistance item in the context of two other possible responses in rejecting a man's sexual advances: "saying 'no' and meaning 'no'", and "saying 'no'

and meaning 'maybe'. As Muehlenhard and Rogers note, this additional clarification is likely to reduce the number of false positives they found in their study. Secondly, token resistance was assessed in the present studies in a dichotomous "yes/no"-format rather than a graded frequency scale. Muehlenhard and Rogers discuss the possibility that their response format may have had a normalizing effect, i.e. suggesting to respondents that some use of token resistance was "normative" and thereby inflating prevalence rates. Given these two significant methodological differences, it is unlikely that the prevalence rates obtained in the present set of studies are the result of misunderstanding or response bias to the extent suggested by the Muehlenhard and Rogers study.

The consistency in previous research about the prevalence of token resistance has been much greater than the consensus about its functional significance. This is true in particular for token resistance that is seen by some authors as a playful part of the normal dating ritual (O'Sullivan & Allgeier, 1994), whereas others stress the adverse consequences of concealing one's true intentions (e.g. Muehlenhard & Hollabaugh, 1988). The present findings support the latter position by showing that both token resistance and compliance are potential risk factors of sexual victimization. For the two female samples in Studies 1 and 2 and the homosexual sample in Study 3, it was shown that respondents who reported having said "no" when they meant "yes" were significantly more likely to be sexually victimized. Compliance was associated with an increased risk of sexual victimization in Study 1 and Study 3. The finding that compliance was linked to an increased risk of sexual victimization in Study 3 is important in relation to the inconsistent findings concerning this variable in the first two studies. While Study 1 found a significant effect, Study 2 did not. A possible explanation for this discrepancy was that respondents in Study 1 may have referred to the same experiences both in the SES and in response to the compliance item. When they were explicitly asked to differentiate between compliance and sexual victimization, compliance no longer showed an effect. However, Study 3, which also included the additional instruction, did produce a significant odds ratio for compliance as a risk factor of victimization.

Thus, the inconsistency in the two heterosexual data sets cannot be explained conclusively by the potential response redundancy in Study 1, and further data are needed to explore the role of compliance in sexual victimization.

Findings from the three studies are highly consistent in demonstrating that men who show token resistance are more likely to commit sexually aggressive behaviors. Furthermore, the present study asked men to indicate whether they had perceived token resistance or compliance in a female partner as a risk factor for sexual aggression. Men who believed that a woman has said "no" to their sexual advances even though they were in fact willing to have sex with them were expected to be more likely to pursue their sexual interests against the woman's will, i.e. show sexual aggression. The functional significance of perceived token resistance may be twofold: (a) it may "teach" the man that women sometimes reject a sexual offer initially only to give in after more persistent efforts, and (b) it can be used as a justification for ignoring a woman's stated refusal to engage in sexual contact. Both meanings are conducive to sexual aggression in that they undermine the man's acceptance of a woman's unwillingness to have sex with him. In a similar vein, the perception of compliance may create the impression that women are undecided or unclear in communicating their sexual intentions or even may not be particularly bothered by having sex without wanting to. One potential consequence of this impression is for men to disregard as dishonest or ambiguous any communication that contradicts their own desires.

The findings from Studies 1 and 2, which measured perceived token resistance and compliance, provide some support for the above reasoning. In Study 1, men who reported perceived token resistance were significantly more likely to be sexually aggressive. However, Study 2 failed to replicate this pattern of results. Perceived compliance was found to predict the overall risk of sexual aggression in both studies, but predicted severe sexual aggression only in Study 2. Given that the two studies were highly similar in terms of both sample and methodology, it is difficult to explain the divergent findings with regard to perceived token resistance, and further data are required to substantiate the findings from Study 1.

The last study went beyond previous evidence by exploring the role of ambiguous communication among homosexual men. First of all, it is important to note that the prevalence rate for token resistance in the homosexual sample was highly similar to the two heterosexual samples. Rates for compliance were somewhat higher than in the two female samples from Studies 1 and 2. Classifying the homosexual respondents in terms of their victimization and aggression status, it was found that compared to the heterosexual samples, sexual victimization and aggression were less prevalent in this group. Whereas just over a third of the heterosexual females fell into the "no victimization" group (37% in Study 1 and 34.7% in Study 2), the corresponding figure for the homosexual sample was 55.6%. Similarly, just over half of the male respondents in the two heterosexual samples were classified as non-aggressive (51.5% and 54.5%, respectively), the figure was 71.1% for the homosexual sample.

As far as the link between ambiguous communication and sexual victimization is concerned, both token resistance and compliance were found to be associated with an increased risk of victimization for homosexual men. The results closely match those obtained for female victimization in the first two studies. The finding that the risk of committing sexually aggressive behavior is increased as a function of token resistance also corroborates the evidence from the heterosexual domain. Thus, it seems that the ambiguous communication of sexual intentions has similar effects on sexual aggression in heterosexual and homosexual relationships

It is important, however, to note some limitations of the present research. One such limitation is that broad prevalence measures of token resistance and compliance were used rather than incidence measures referring to a specified period of time. This means that the token resistance and compliance groups as well as the perceived token resistance and compliance groups comprised individuals who may have differed substantially in the frequency with which they used (or perceived) each strategy. However, this heterogeneity should have made it more difficult to detect an effect of ambiguous communication on sexual aggression and victimization, and the fact that consistent results were obtained suggests that there is a substantive link.

A second limitation refers to the controversial issue of whether token resistance is a deceptive or manipulative strategy (e.g., Sprecher et al., 1994) or rather reflects a gradual change of intention in the course of a sexual encounter (e.g., Shotland & Hunter, 1995). This question did not receive conceptual or empirical attention in the present research because it was not considered to be centrally relevant to the issue of sexual aggression. If initial rejection is followed by subsequent acceptance of sexual advances, the question of whether the initial rejection is genuine or pretended is of secondary importance. In any case, an ambiguous message is communicated that may give rise to the belief that a refusal to consent to sexual contacts is not to be taken seriously.

Finally, it must be noted that men and women in the heterosexual studies were not asked parallel questions concerning perceived token resistance and compliance. Whereas members of both sexes were asked about token resistance, women were asked about compliance and men were asked about perceived compliance as well as perceived token resistance. This decision was thought to be appropriate for the study of heterosexual aggression where the roles of victim and perpetrators are divided along gender lines. In the homosexual study, all participants were asked the same ambiguous communication questions as the female heterosexual samples, i.e. token resistance and compliance. Future research should obtain parallel measures of ambiguous communication from potential victims and perpetrators of sexual aggression to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the role of intimacy negotiation in both heterosexual and homosexual relationships.

Altogether, the conclusion from the three studies concerning the significance of ambiguous communication in sexual interactions is clear: being ambiguous about one's sexual intentions may be a widely accepted, often pleasurable element of both the heterosexual and the homosexual dating script, but it bears the risk of sexual aggression. The findings thus support Abbey's (1999) warning, that she directed at the address of women, but that our findings show to be equally pertinent to men in homosexual contacts:

Men need to know that when a woman says "no" she means it and that her desires must be respected, regardless of what she has said or done previously. For this to occur, women must say "no" only when they genuinely mean it and must be more aware of the way in which their behaviors are perceived by men. Certainly, women have the right to dress as they choose or to drink alcohol on a date, but they need to realize how some men are likely to interpret these cues and counteract those assumptions by verbally making their intentions clear. (Abbey, 1991, p. 107).

Footnotes

¹ The purpose of breaking down reports of victimization and aggression by victim-perpetrator relationship was to obtain a more fine-grained picture of the prevalence of sexual aggression. Since this aspect is not immediately relevant to the present paper and the findings have been reported in detail elsewhere (Krahé, Scheinberger-Olwig & Waizenhöfer, 1999), it will not be pursued further in this context.

² A copy of the original instruments may be obtained from the first author.

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Table 1

Classification of victim and assailant status in % (Studies 1 and 2)

	Victim Status		Assailant Status	
	(Female Respondents)		(Male Respondents)	
	Study 1	Study 2	Study 1	Study 2
None	36.7	34.7	51.5	54.4
Moderate	33.9	36.5	36.9	32.1
Severe	29.3	22.8	11.6	13.4

Table 2

(a) Odd Ratios of Sexual Victimization: Studies 1 and 2

Victimization	None vs. Any		None vs. Severe	
	Study 1	Study 2	Study 1	Study 2
Token Resistance	1.48	2.31*	1.93*	2.25*
Compliance	3.05***	1.45	4.27***	1.11
% Correct Classifications	63.64	63.92	67.96	60.40

(b) Odd Ratios of Committing Sexual Aggression: Study 1+2

Aggression	None vs. Any		None vs. Severe	
	Study 1	Study 2	Study 1	Study 2
Token Resistance	1.72*	3.32*	3.12*	2.39*
Perceived Token Resistance	2.40	1.29	4.42**	1.69
Perceived Compliance	1.87*	2.86***	0.11	4.06***
% Correct Classifications	64.00	64.02	81.69	80.63

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$ for the corresponding unstandardized logistic regression coefficients.

Table 3

(a) Odd Ratios of Sexual Victimization: Study 3

	Victimization	
	None vs. Any	None vs. Severe
Token Resistance	2.01**	2.92***
Compliance	2.47***	3.75**
% Correct Classifications	63.58	71.71

(a) Odd Ratios of Committing Sexual Aggression: Study 3

	Aggression	
	None vs. Any	None vs. Severe
Token Resistance	2.05**	2.19**
Compliance	1.40	1.23
% Correct Classifications	70.95	77.78

** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$ for the corresponding unstandardized logistic regression coefficients.