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## Characteristics of male and female victims of sexual coercion

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**Abstract:** The current study investigated whether men and women who had experienced sexual coercion shared similar characteristics, and assessed the predictive value of various victim characteristics. Participants were 251 male and 267 female University students. Findings were largely consistent with past literature indicating a prevalence of various forms of coercion of 38.8% for men and 47.9% for women. In addition, past findings on the context of men and women's experience with sexual coercion were replicated, specifically the initiator's strategies, the sexual activities that ensued, and the relationship between the initiator and the victim. For men and women alike, the number of sexual partners, the number of romantic relationships, and the length of the longest romantic relationship were the best predictors of sexually coerced experiences. Furthermore exploration of victim characteristics broke new ground and revealed that the belief in men's sexual accessibility was predictive of sexual victimization for both men and women. Implications of these findings are discussed in reference to sexual script theory.

### Introduction

Sexual coercion has been widely studied over the past several decades and is recognized as a prevalent social issue. However, past research has focused almost exclusively on coercion of females by males despite evidence that prevalence rates of sexual coercion of males by females may be as high as 58.5% (Anderson & Sorenson, 1999). It has been argued that the lack of research on sexual coercion by females is due to the scientific community's adherence to the traditional script of sexual experiences (Anderson & Aymami, 1993; O'Sullivan & Byers, 1993). Sexual script theory (Simon & Gagnon, 1986) asserts that culturally constructed scripts structure sexual encounters and delineate what is expected of men and women by providing a model of masculinity and femininity. Men are expected to be avid initiators of sexual activity who are continuously seeking, or are at least amenable to any opportunity for a sexual encounter. In contrast, women are expected to be somewhat resistant to the sexual advances of men by controlling the amount of sexual access a pursuant man is permitted (Byers, 1996; Clements-Schreiber, Rempel, & Desmarais, 1998; O'Sullivan & Byers, 1993).

Much of the research challenging the evidence for these traditional sexual scripts commenced in the 1980s and 1990s when studies revealed that a considerable proportion of women reported having coerced a reluctant man into sexual activity (for a review see Byers & O'Sullivan, 1998). Moreover, men also self-reported unexpectedly high rates of incidents in which they were coerced into unwanted sexual activity by women (for a review see Davies, 2002). The current study builds on this emergent literature by comparing the prevalence of both men's and women's experiences of sexual coercion with both sexes being considered as possible initiators. Our goal was to revisit past findings on the prevalence and context of both men's and women's experience of sexual coercion and to conduct gender comparisons and assess the predictive value of various victim characteristics in relation to such experiences.

Findings from past research on sexual coercion have been difficult to compare because the definition and measurement of sexual coercion have varied across studies. In the current study, we adopted the definition proposed by Struckman-Johnson and Struckman-Johnson (1994), who defined sexual coercion as "an experience of being pressured or forced by another person to have contact which involved touching of

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sexual parts or sexual intercourse – oral, anal, or vaginal” (p. 96). Their definition incorporates “psychological coercion, including verbal persuasion, threat of love withdrawal, bribery, and use of intoxication” (p. 96) without physical force or the intent to harm, and “a higher level of coercion”, physical coercion, which includes “physical restraint, physical harm, physical intimidation, threat of harm, and use of weapons” (p. 96).

Since our chosen definition of sexual coercion covers a wide range of differing behaviours, it is difficult to find terms broad enough to satisfactorily characterize individuals’ experiences across this spectrum. Terms such as “perpetrator” and “victim” are often used in the context of physical harm, intimidation, or forced intercourse (which is a crime) but they seem too strong or overstated to characterize some situations of psychological coercion, such as verbal pressuring (which is not a crime). We are aware of this limitation and have opted here for the terms “initiator” and “victim” on the understanding that “initiator” may sometimes seem too benign or “victim” too excessive for the circumstances involved.

The literature on women’s sexual victimization provides strong indications for the variables that should be included in a predictive model of heterosexual coercion initiated by men. These include numerous contextual factors such as initiator strategies, characteristics of the initiator, characteristics of the victim, and the nature of the relationship between initiator and victim (for a review see Adams-Curtis & Forbes, 2004). Research on men’s experiences with female-initiated sexual coercion suggests consideration of factors such as initiator strategies and the relationship between initiators and victims; characteristics of male victims have yet to be examined. The present study expands upon existing findings regarding initiator strategies and the relationship between initiators and victims and breaks new ground by exploring the characteristics of male victims. The literature review that follows provides background for the hypotheses under investigation in this study.

#### ***Initiation of sexual coercion***

Both men and women commonly report having experienced verbal or psychological coercion as well

as being taken advantage of in an intoxicated state (Anderson & Aymami, 1993; Anderson & Sorenson, 1999; Krahe, Scheinberger-Olwig, & Bieneck, 2003; Krahe, Waizenhofer, & Moller, 2003; Larimer, Lydum, Anderson, & Turner, 1999; O’Sullivan, Byers, & Finkelman, 1998; Struckman-Johnson & Struckman-Johnson, 1994). The few studies that have compared heterosexual coercion by both sexes suggest that men and women had experienced similar pressuring strategies in comparable proportions, with one exception. Women tend to report being physically forced into sexual activity more frequently than men suggesting that male initiators are more likely to include physical force (Larimer et al., 1999).

#### ***The relationship between initiator and victim***

Research examining the nature of the relationship between male initiators and female victims indicates that sexual coercion is more likely to occur in more intimate relationships (for an early review see Craig, 1990; Gross, Winslett, Roberts, & Gohm, 2006; Lannutti & Monahan, 2004; O’Sullivan, & Byers, 1993; O’Sullivan et al., 1998). Though few studies have examined the relationship between female initiators and male victims, the available literature suggests a similar pattern in which men are more likely to be coerced by friends or dating partners than strangers (Krahe et al., 2003; Struckman-Johnson & Struckman-Johnson, 1994). Given the limited number of studies examining the relationship between female initiators and male victims of sexual coercion, further research in this area is clearly warranted.

#### ***Characteristics of victims***

To date, the characteristics of males who have experienced heterosexual sexual coercion have not been investigated and, consequently, research on females with such experience must be used as a guide. Past research examining the characteristics of female victims has consistently demonstrated that having had a greater number of sexual partners is associated with having experienced sexual coercion (Lottes, 1991; Testa & Derman, 1999; Van Bruggen, Runtz, & Kadlec, 2006). A history of sexual coercion in childhood has also been linked to experiencing adult sexual coercion and has been noted as a consistent predictor in a number of literature reviews (Messman & Long, 1996; Polusny & Follette, 1995) although



contradictory results have also been published (Atkeson, Calhoun, & Morris, 1989; Mandoki & Burkhart, 1989). Some researchers have found that women with lower self-esteem and lower levels of assertiveness are more likely to experience sexual coercion (Testa & Derman, 1999) while others have not found this association (Amik & Calhoun, 1987; Stets & Pirog-Good, 1987). In light of the mixed results, we believe there is a need for further research on the influence of self-esteem, assertiveness and a history of sexual abuse.

Research on female initiators has shown that they share similar characteristics with female victims (Christopher, Owens, & Stecker, 1993; Clements-Schreiber et al., 1998; Menard, Nagayama Hall, Phung, Erian Ghebrail, & Martin, 2003; O'Sullivan & Byers, 1993). Whether this pattern holds for men has not yet been determined since there is no study of male victim's characteristics. However, studies examining characteristics of male initiators have shown surprisingly similar results to studies that compare female initiators and female victims. Female initiators, male initiators, and female victims are likely to have had more sexual partners (Christopher et al., 1993; for a review see Craig, 1990), and have a history of childhood victimization (Hunter, Figueredo, Malamuth & Becker, 2003; Merrill, Thomsen, Gold, & Milner, 2001; Senn, Desmarais, Verberg, & Wood, 2000; Weeks & Widom, 1998; for reviews see Loh & Gidycz, 2006; Romano & De Luca, 2001).

Both male and female initiators differ significantly from individuals who do not report initiating sexual coercion in terms of their gender beliefs. Male initiators have been found to hold more traditional gender beliefs or to adhere more strongly to gender role stereotypes (Abbey, McAuslan, Zawacki, Clinton, & Buck, 2001; for a review, Craig, 1990; Lackie & de Man, 1997; Loh, Gidycz, Lobo, & Luthra, 2005; Muehlenhard & Linton, 1987; Senn et al., 2000). In contrast, while women who sexually coerce men are more likely to reject the traditional sexual roles for women, they are significantly more likely to endorse the traditional stereotype of men's sexual accessibility (Clements-Schreiber et al., 1998; Lottes, 1991; O'Sullivan & Byers, 1993). Consequently, it is apparent that endorsing traditional sex role beliefs is an important characteristic of

initiators and that both initiators and victims share similar characteristics. In light of these findings the current study explored men and women's gender role beliefs and evaluated whether gender beliefs of victims have value in predicting the experience of sexual coercion.

### **Current study and hypotheses**

The current study expanded upon and replicated past findings regarding the context of sexual coercion by men in comparison to women. Specifically, we replicated studies of the nature of the relationship between the initiator and victim, as well as typical pressuring strategies employed. We also examined characteristics of men and women who self-reported experiencing heterosexual coercion to determine whether victim characteristics are gender-specific and whether these characteristics have significant predictive value for members of both sexes.

We hypothesized:

- (a) that sexual coercion would be more likely to take place in close relationships, such as friendships and dating relationships, than within relationships between strangers or acquaintances.
- (b) that the number of romantic relationships and the length of romantic relationships would be significant predictors of victimization for both men and women.
- (c) that both men and women would report the use of intoxication as the most common initiator strategy, followed by forms of verbal or relational coercion and lastly, the threat or use of physical force.
- (d) that men who had been sexually coerced would have similar characteristics to women who had experienced sexual coercion. Specifically that both male and female victims of sexual coercion would have a higher number of sexual partners, a history of childhood sexual victimization, lower self-esteem and lower levels of assertiveness than participants who had not experienced sexual coercion.
- (e) that both male and female victims would adhere to more traditional gender roles and stereotypes.



## Methods

### Participants

Initial participants were 251 male students and 267 female students enrolled at a mid-sized Canadian University. Errors or inconsistencies in questionnaire completion by participants resulted in the exclusion of 11 men and 8 women. The final sample was thus 240 male and 259 female participants. The mean age of participants was 19 ( $SD = 2$ ). Most were White (90.8%), with Asian/Asian Canadian (7.2%), Black/African Canadian (1%), and Latino/Hispanic or First Nations (less than 1%).

### Procedures

Recruitment took place in a number of undergraduate classes including introductory psychology, biology, economics and agriculture. All participants were informed that the research involved completing an online questionnaire about their sexual experiences. The recruiter emphasized that participant responses were completely anonymous as identifying information, such as their name and student ID, was automatically saved in a separate electronic file that was not linked to questionnaire response data file. Participants were able to complete the 30-minute survey from any computer location; however, it was essential that participants completed the survey in one sitting. Submissions from IP addresses were not controlled, allowing students to make use of University campus computers. Participants could gain access to the website with a valid student ID; however, each student ID could only be used once. Measures were always presented in the same order as is the case in many online surveys due to the complexity of creating randomized questionnaire orders. Participants enrolled in an introductory psychology class received course credit whereas those who were recruited from other courses were entered into a draw for a monetary prize of \$100.

### Measures

#### Demographic information

Participants were asked to select the ethnic description that best described them from a list that included "Asian or Asian Canadian", "Black or African Canadian", "Hispanic or Latino", "First Nations" or "White". Participants were also asked to provide their age.

#### Childhood sexual experiences

The Unwanted Childhood Sexual Experiences Questionnaire (UCSEQ; Stevenson, 1998) is a 13-item scale derived from a larger questionnaire designed by Finkelhor (1979). Participants provided 'yes' or 'no' responses to statements regarding incidents of childhood sexual abuse (e.g., "You touching an adult's sexual organs"). Participants were given a score of '1' if they responded 'yes' to an item indicating they had ever experienced an unwanted childhood sexual experience and a '0' if they responded 'no' to such an item which thus indicated they had not. Reliability of the 13-item scale has not been previously assessed. However, Stevenson and Gajarsky (1992) provided evidence for the validity of this scale by reporting frequencies of unwanted sexual experiences that were consistent with earlier reports (Finkelhor, 1979, 1984; Groth, 1979, as cited in Stevenson, 1998). In the current study, this scale demonstrated a high level of reliability ( $\alpha = .85$ ).

#### History of dating and sexual activity

To gain an understanding of participants' dating history they were asked to provide the number of past romantic relationships they had experienced, as well as the length of their longest romantic relationship. Participants were also asked to provide their total number of sexual partners and the age at which they first experienced sexual intercourse. The terms "romantic relationship" and "sexual intercourse" were not defined for participants and thus represent participant's interpretations.

#### Self-esteem

The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Inventory (Rosenberg, 1965) is a widely used and well-validated measure consisting of 10 items designed to assess self-esteem generally rather than within particular domains (e.g., "I feel that I have a number of good qualities). Each item was scored on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly *disagree*) to 4 (strongly *agree*). Self-esteem items were summed to produce a total self-esteem score for each participant. This scale demonstrated high internal consistency in the current study ( $\alpha = .87$ ).

#### Assertiveness

The Rathus Assertiveness Schedule (Rathus, 1973) is a well-validated measure that assessed general



assertiveness through 30 items (e.g., "To be honest, people often take advantage of me"). Each item was scored on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*very uncharacteristic of me*) to 6 (*very characteristic of me*). Assertiveness items were summed to produce a total assertiveness score for each participant. Internal consistency of this scale was high in the current study ( $\alpha = .82$ ).

#### *Sexual stereotypes*

The Sexual Stereotypes Questionnaire (SSQ; Clements-Schreiber et al., 1998) was used to assess participants' beliefs about male and female sex drives (e.g., "In general, men need sex more than women do"), as well as male sexual accessibility (e.g., "It's easy for a woman to sexually arouse a man if she really wants to"). This is a 10-item measure with each item scored on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*disagree strongly*) to 5 (*agree strongly*). SSQ items relating to gender specific sex drives were summed producing a total score for each participant. Reliability for the gender specific sex drives section of the SSQ was adequate ( $\alpha = .65$ ). The SSQ items relating to male sexual accessibility were also summed to produce a total score for each participant. Reliability for the male sexual accessibility section of the SSQ was also adequate ( $\alpha = .70$ ).

#### **Dependent Measure**

##### *Adult experience with sexual coercion*

The Sexual Experiences Questionnaire (SEQ) was developed for the current study to assess participants' adult experiences of sexual coercion by the opposite sex. The SEQ was based on the widely used and well-validated Sexual Experience Survey (SES) designed by Koss, Gidycz, and Wisniewski (1987). Previous research (Gyls & McNamara, 1996) has suggested that the SES inflates estimates of rape by using an overly broad definition and by collapsing the threat of physical force and the use of force together. Although there has also been research suggesting that the estimates are realistic (Alksnis, Desmarais, Senn, & Hunter, 2000), as well as research demonstrating an underestimation of both the use and threat of physical sexual aggression (Testa, VanZile-Tamsen, Livingston, & Koss, 2004), we refrained from collapsing threat and use of force, and also from labelling acts as "rape".

The original SES was designed to assess women's experiences of sexual coercion by male initiators. Three revisions to the original scale were made. First, item wording was altered to create a male and a female form. Although the SES is modified in the majority of cases in which it is used by researchers (Testa et al., 2004), it is important to note that changes to the wording of the items may alter the way that some respondents interpret the questions. Next, additional items assessing pressuring strategies more appropriate to the experience of male victims were supplemented. The additional strategies were generated through a review of past literature (Anderson & Aymami, 1993; Anderson & Sorenson, 1999; O'Sullivan, et al., 1998; Struckman-Johnson & Struckman-Johnson, 1994). As in the original SES, participants were simply asked to respond 'yes' or 'no' to a series of statements such as "Have you ever...had sexual intercourse with a man/woman because he/she threatened to use physical force?". Third, in addition to the 'yes/no' statements, the current study replicated the Krahe, Scheinberger-Olwig, and Bieneck (2003) methodology by asking participants who responded 'yes' to this question to list the type of sexual activity that occurred, as well as the nature of their relationship with the initiator (dating partner, friend, acquaintance, or stranger). Responses regarding the type of sexual activity were categorized as 'kissing and fondling', 'oral sex' or 'intercourse'. When more than one form of sexual activity was listed under one item, the most extreme form of sexual activity was coded. Participants who reported that they were coerced into unwanted "sex" were coded as '3' to represent intercourse, and participants who listed "making out" were coded as '1' to represent kissing and fondling. Dichotomous variables (yes/no) were created for each level of sexual activity (kissing/fondling, oral sex, intercourse), regardless of the type of pressuring strategy employed.

## **Results**

### *History of dating and sexual activity*

A large majority of participants (86%) had been involved in at least one romantic relationship (range 0 to 10). There was a wide range of relationship lengths (one month to 12 years,  $SD = 17.1$  months) with an average length of 17 months and a median



length of 12 months. Most participants (79.7%) indicated that they had ever had sexual intercourse (mean age of first intercourse 17 years ( $SD = 2.1$ , range 13 to 23 years). Chi-square analysis revealed that a significantly greater percentage of males (84.2%) than females (74.9%) had ever had intercourse [ $\chi^2(1, N = 496) = 6.28, p = .001$ ]. Among those who had intercourse 40.4% had one intercourse partner, 19.9% had two, 12.1% three, 7.6% four, 4.5% five, and the remaining 15.4% had six or more sexual partners. An equivalent number of male (24.2%) and female (23.2%) participants reported some form of unwanted sexual contact prior to the age of 14 by someone who was at least 5 years older ( $z = 0.13, ns$ ).

#### Prevalence of Coerced Sexual Experiences

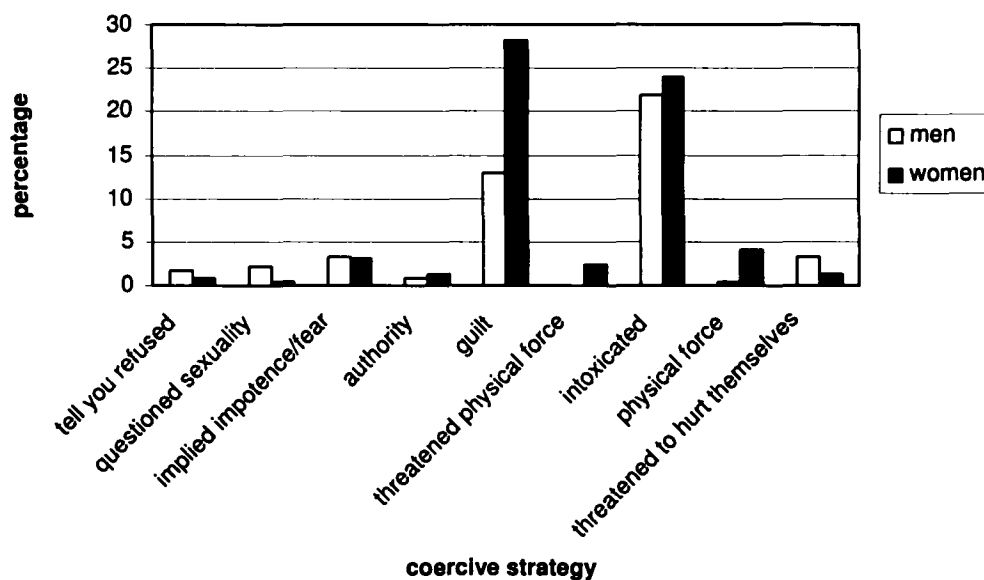
Overall, a significantly greater percentage among all female participants (47.9%) than male participants (38.8%) reported being the victims of some form of coerced sexual activity,  $\chi^2(1, N = 499) = 4.2, p < .05$ . While the coerced activities reported were not necessarily mutually exclusive (i.e., the same encounter could be reported more than once under different items), participants most frequently reported being coerced into kissing or fondling (women 34%, men 23.3%), followed by intercourse (women 21.2%,

men 18.3%), and oral sex (women 4.2%, men 5.8%). Women were significantly more likely to have been coerced into kissing or fondling than men  $\chi^2(1, N = 499) = 6.9, p < .01$ ; however, there was no significant gender difference in either coerced oral sex  $\chi^2(1, N = 499) = .66, ns$ , or coerced intercourse  $\chi^2(1, N = 499) = .66, ns$ . Consequently, the most prevalent experiences of sexual coercion for both sexes were associated with kissing and fondling and with sexual intercourse with a statistically significant gender difference found only with the former in that women were more likely than men to have experienced coerced kissing and fondling.

#### Initiator strategies

Both men and women reported that initiators used guilt and intoxication to a greater extent than other strategies (see Figure 1). Women reported that guilt was the most commonly experienced coercive strategy ( $n_{\text{women}} = 73, 28.2\%$ ) whereas it was identified significantly less often by men ( $n_{\text{men}} = 31, 12.9\%$ )  $\chi^2(1, N = 497) = 17.6, p < .001$ , for whom being taken advantage of when intoxicated was the most commonly experienced coercive strategy ( $n_{\text{men}} = 52, 21.7\%$ ). Note that there was no significant gender difference in the percentage of men and

Figure 1 Prevalence rates of men and women's experiences with sexual coercion strategies.





women who reported being coerced when intoxicated ( $n_{\text{women}} = 62, 23.9\%$ ),  $\chi^2(1, N = 497) = .42, ns$ . The remainder of the strategies were endorsed by too few respondents (less than 5%) to allow for meaningful statistical comparisons between men and women.

*The relationship between initiator and victim*

Overall, the probability of experiencing sexual coercion, for both men and women, was relatively similar across types of relationships. However two noteworthy trends did emerge. First, strategies that manipulate the emotional connection between the victim and initiator, such as guilt or threatening to hurt oneself, were more commonly utilized by dating partners and friends than by strangers and acquaintances (89.6% of initiators who used guilt were dating partners or friends, in comparison to 10.4% of acquaintance and strangers,  $\chi^2(1, N = 113) = 60.84, p < .001$ . All 11 of the initiators who threatened to hurt themselves were dating partners or friends). Second, strangers or acquaintances more commonly employed strategies that do not rely on intimacy between the initiator and victim, such as intoxicating the victim (61.2% of such reports involved strangers or acquaintances, in comparison to 38.8% involving friends and dating partners,  $\chi^2(1, N = 122) = 5.24, p = .022$ ).

*Characteristics of victims*

Correlational analyses used to examine the interrelationship among the predictor and criterion variables suggested no concern about collinearity (Table 1), with the highest correlation found between self-esteem and assertiveness ( $r = .44, p < .001$ ).

Binary Logistic Regression was deemed to be the most appropriate analysis to use to determine the predictive value of the victim characteristics since the outcome variable was coded as a dichotomous categorical variable (the experience of sexual coercion, yes/no) and the proportion of yes to no responses was greatly disproportionate, as expected. All categorical predictor variables were appropriately dummy coded. Due to the mixed evidence in the literature regarding their predictive value, a decision was made to merge the exploratory variables with the variables taken from past research in a single block. The results will be presented separately by type of coerced sexual activity. Note: The experience of being coerced into oral sex occurred too infrequently among both male and female participants to allow for meaningful analysis.

*Coerced kissing and fondling*

A test of the full model regarding coerced kissing and fondling with all eight predictors against a constant only model was statistically reliable for women in the sample  $\chi^2(5, N = 256) = 16.09, p < .01$ . This indicated that the predictors, as a set, reliably distinguish between those women who had experienced sexual coercion and those who had not. Table 2 provides the regression coefficients, standard errors, Wald statistics, and odds ratios for each predictor. According to the Wald criterion, the number of romantic relationships, Wald[1] = 6.60,  $p = .01$ , and the length of longest romantic relationship, Wald[1] = 9.52,  $p < .01$ , reliably predicted the experience of coerced kissing or fondling amongst women (Table 2). Women with a higher number of romantic relationships and relationships of a shorter duration were significantly more likely to be coerced

**Table 1** Correlations between predictor variables and dependent variables

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Number of partners	-	.10	.05	.19*	.27*	.09	.16*	.02
2. Childhood sexual abuse		-	-.07	.02	.10	.06	.07	.01
3. Self-Esteem			-	.44*	.00	.08	-.10*	-.13*
4. Assertiveness				-	.07	.14*	-.03	-.17*
5. Number of relationships					-	.26*	.11	-.00
6. Length of relationships						-	.02	-.03
7. Male sexual accessibility							-	.13*
8. Gender dependent sex drives								-

Note: \*  $p < .01$



**Table 2** Results of logistic regression analysis for coerced kissing and fondling

Predictors	B	S.E.	Wald	Exp (B)
<b>Women</b>				
Childhood sexual abuse	-.21	.32	.41	.81
Self-esteem	-.04	.03	1.72	.96
Assertiveness	.00	.01	.08	1.00
Number of partners	-.01	.05	.03	.99
Number of relationships	.37	.14	6.60**	1.45
Length of relationship	-.03	.01	9.52**	.97
Male sexual accessibility	.03	.03	.80	1.03
Gender-dependent sex drives	-.07	.05	.02	.99
<b>Men</b>				
Childhood sexual abuse	-.41	.36	1.34	.66
Self-esteem	-.05	.03	2.00	.95
Assertiveness	-.00	.01	.06	.10
Number of partners	-.01	.04	.12	.99
Number of relationships	.06	.13	.26	1.07
Length of relationship	-.01	.01	.58	.99
Male sexual accessibility	.08	.04	3.48	1.08
Gender-dependent sex drives	.08	.06	1.74	1.09

Note: Nagelkerke  $R^2 = .11$  (women),  $.09$  (men); \*\*\* $p < .001$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \* $p < .05$

into unwanted kissing or fondling than women with a smaller number of romantic relationships, or relationships of a longer duration.

A test of the full model regarding coerced kissing and fondling with all eight predictors against a constant only model was not statistically reliable for men  $\chi^2(5, N = 239) = 6.89, ns$ . Thus, in contrast to women, the predictors, as a set, did not reliably distinguish between those men who had experienced sexual coercion and those who had not (Table 2).

#### Coerced intercourse

For women, a test of the full model regarding coerced intercourse with all eight predictors against a constant only model was statistically reliable  $\chi^2(5, N = 256) = 10.31, p < .05$ . As shown in Table 3, the number of sexual partners reported, Wald[1] = 17.31,  $p < .001$ , and a belief in males' sexual accessibility, Wald[1] = 4.55,  $p < .05$ , reliably predicted the experience of being coerced into sexual intercourse. Women who had a higher number of sexual partners were significantly more likely to report being coerced into sexual intercourse. Also, women who believed in the

**Table 3** Results of logistic regression analysis for intercourse

Predictors	B	S.E.	Wald	Exp (B)
<b>Women</b>				
Childhood sexual abuse	-.55	.39	1.97	.58
Self-esteem	-.03	.04	.40	.97
Assertiveness	.02	.01	1.98	1.02
Number of partners	.28	.07	17.31***	1.32
Number of relationships	.22	.16	1.97	1.25
Length of relationship	.02	.01	2.90	1.02
Male sexual accessibility	.09	.04	4.55*	1.10
Gender-dependent sex drives	-.04	.06	.30	.97
<b>Men</b>				
Childhood sexual abuse	.11	.46	.05	1.11
Self-esteem	.02	.04	.15	1.02
Assertiveness	-.00	.01	.04	1.00
Number of partners	.21	.06	11.17**	1.23
Number of relationships	.35	.17	4.19*	1.42
Length of relationship	-.04	.02	4.83*	.96
Male sexual accessibility	.18	.06	9.85**	1.19
Gender-dependent sex drives	-.02	.07	.06	.98

Note. Nagelkerke  $R^2 = .32$  (Women),  $.33$  (Men); \*\*\* $p < .001$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \* $p < .05$

sexual accessibility of men were significantly more likely to report being coerced into sexual intercourse.

A test of the full model with coerced intercourse as the criterion was also statistically reliable for men in the sample  $\chi^2(5, N = 239) = 20.69, p < .001$ . As was the case with females, the number of sexual partners, Wald[1] = 11.17,  $p = .001$ , and a belief in males' sexual accessibility, Wald[1] = 9.85,  $p < .01$ , reliably predicted men's experience of being coerced into sexual intercourse (Table 3). Men who had a higher number of sexual partners and those who believed in the sexual accessibility of men, were significantly more likely to have been coerced into sexual intercourse. At a lower level of significance, the number of relationships reported, Wald[1] = 4.19,  $p < .05$ , and the length of longest relationship, Wald[1] = 4.83,  $p < .05$ , also predicted having been coerced into sexual intercourse for men. Men who had more romantic relationships, and those who had shorter romantic relationships, were significantly more likely to be coerced into sexual intercourse with women, than those who had fewer or longer romantic relationships.



## Discussion

This study sought to compare men's and women's experience of heterosexual coercion and to assess whether a set of relevant attitudinal and personal characteristics could reliably predict the likelihood of various forms of coerced experiences. In line with Anderson and Sorenson (1999) who argued that results in emerging areas of research, such as this one, may be particularly influential, we aimed to balance the exploration of new ideas with the replication of past findings. Accordingly, the current study attempted to replicate past findings on the prevalence and context of sexual coercion, specifically the pressuring strategies utilized, the sexual activities that ensued, and the relationship between the initiator and victim. In addition, we did gender comparisons to determine whether men and women who had experienced sexual coercion shared similar characteristics, and to explore the predictive value of such victim characteristics.

The consensual sexual behaviour reported in the current study is consistent with the Adams-Curtis and Forbes (2004) review of the normative sexual behaviour of university students. These authors suggested that approximately 70% to 75% of undergraduate students were sexually active; in our sample 79.7% had ever had sexual intercourse and 86% had been in a romantic relationship. Also consistent with our findings is the report of Adams-Curtis and Forbes (2004) that most university students had a relatively small number of sexual partners and that men had more partners than women. In these respects our sample appears to be fairly representative of university students in general.

### *Prevalence of coerced sexual experiences*

In line with previous research (Krahe et al., 2003; Larimer et al., 1999; Struckman-Johnson & Struckman-Johnson, 1994), roughly two out of every five men in the present study reported being coerced by a woman into unwanted sexual activity of some form. In comparison, almost half of female participants reported being coerced. Higher rates of sexual victimization among women are consistent with findings from past research (Hogben, Byrne, & Hamburger, 1996; Stets & Pirog-Good, 1989). However, when sexual coercion experiences are

categorized by type of sexual activity, our data revealed that women experienced significantly more coerced kissing or fondling (women 34%, men 23.3%), but not significantly more coerced oral sex (women 4.2%, men 5.8%), or coerced intercourse than men (women 21.2%, men 18.3%). This finding, which is also consistent with results from previous research (Larimer et al., 1999; Lottes, 1991), helps clarify the likelihood of different types of sexual coercion and the circumstances in which gender differences in experience of sexual coercion are most likely to occur.

### *Initiator strategies*

The current findings indicate that being purposefully intoxicated by the initiator is the most commonly experienced coercive strategy reported by men (21.7%), followed by the use of guilt (12.9%), whereas for women, guilt was the most commonly reported pressuring strategy (28.2%) followed by being intoxicated (23.9%). It is interesting to note that both of these commonly reported strategies require the participant to perceive the intention of the initiator. Consequently reports of these strategies are prone to subjectivity, as well as retrospective interpretation. Nevertheless, the results capture the victims' perceptions of their own experience. Women's greater likelihood of reporting being sexually coerced by the use of guilt can be explained in one of two ways. It is possible that male initiators use guilt as a pressuring strategy more frequently than female initiators or it may be that female victims are more susceptible to the use of guilt than male victims. Lewin (1985) asserts that women are socialized to believe that they should put men's needs ahead of their own. She suggests that women's self images are more reliant on 'giving', which in turn makes it difficult for them to resist psychological pressure to engage in unwanted sexual activity. Note that we did not find the same gender difference in the reported use of intoxication as a coercive strategy. Both men and women indicated high rates of use of their intoxication by the initiator as a form of coercion, which is consistent with results from many previous studies (Anderson & Aymami, 1993; Anderson & Sorenson, 1999; Krahe et al., 2003; Larimer, et al., 1999; Lottes, 1991). This finding underscores the importance of including the use of



intoxication as a coercive strategy when assessing incidents of sexual coercion.

*The relationship between initiator and victim*

Prior research (for a review, Craig, 1990; Gross et al., 2006; Lannutti & Monahan, 2004; Lottes, 1991; O'Sullivan & Byers, 1993; O'Sullivan et al., 1998) has noted that the potential for coercion increases as does the level of closeness or intimacy in the relationship. Our findings provide only partial support for this argument since the probability of being coerced, for both men and women, was relatively similar across each type of relationship. However, two exceptions are worth noting and both are consistent with past research (Muehlenhard & Linton, 1987; Stets & Pirog-Good, 1989). First, strategies that manipulate the emotional connection between the victim and initiator, such as guilt or threatening to hurt oneself, were most commonly utilized by dating partners and friends. The second exception is essentially the reverse of the first whereby strangers or acquaintances were more likely to employ strategies, such as intoxication of the victim, that do not rely on intimacy between the initiator and victim. This finding is intuitive in that strangers and acquaintances do not have an emotional connection with the victim to manipulate and consequently must rely on other pressuring strategies. Furthermore early social psychology research has shown that arousing or manipulating emotions enhances persuasion (Lumsdaine & Janis, 1953) and it may not be surprising to find that sexual coercion involves taking advantage of such means.

*Characteristics of victims*

Two of our main objectives were to explore whether men and women who experience sexual coercion share similar personal characteristics and whether these characteristics have predictive value for women and men. Past research suggests that both male and female victims of sexual coercion would have a history of childhood sexual victimization, a higher number of sexual partners, lower self-esteem and lower levels of assertiveness than participants who had not experienced sexual coercion. In addition, we hypothesized that both men and women who experienced coercion would adhere to more traditional gender roles and stereotypes.

Results regarding the predictive value of the relationship history variables were mixed. The number of romantic relationships that participants reported and the length of romantic relationships reported was predictive of coerced kissing and fondling for women and coerced intercourse for men. It is likely that the predictive value of these characteristics lies in the simple fact that individuals who have more short-term partners have greater exposure to potential initiators of sexual coercion and thus more opportunity to be coerced (Lottes, 1991). However, it is prudent to point out that the two relationship variables did not significantly predict men's experience of coerced kissing and fondling or women's experience of coerced intercourse. This pattern of gender reversal is puzzling and certainly warrants further investigation.

In line with the notion of exposure and opportunity, the number of sexual partners reported was predictive of both men's and women's experience of coerced intercourse. However, this same variable did not predict coerced kissing and fondling for either men or women. This finding suggests that kissing and fondling are very distinct forms of sexual activity from sexual intercourse. Kissing and fondling often occur in the initial stages of a progression of sexual activity, and may mark a first attempt to initiate sexual activity in a previously platonic relationship. Accordingly, it is possible that coerced kissing and fondling is more context driven and less relationally driven than coerced intercourse.

Consistent with some past research (Clements-Schreiber et al., 1997), a belief in men's sexual accessibility predicted women's experience of sexual coercion such that a stronger belief in such accessibility was associated with higher rates of coercion. Interestingly, similar results were found for men. While both men and women can hold the same stereotype of men's sexual accessibility, i.e. that men are constantly desiring and always willing to engage in sexual activity, the endorsement of this stereotype likely has different ramifications for members of each sex. For men, endorsing the traditional sexual stereotype may lead to feelings of guilt when they are reluctant to engage in sexual activity, as they believe average men are always amenable to any sexual opportunity. Norris, Nurius and Dimeff (1996)



suggest that feelings of guilt or responsibility make it more difficult for individuals to offer effective resistance. Accordingly, men who feel guilty about their own reluctance may have more difficulty offering effective resistance, and, as a consequence, are more vulnerable to being coerced into sexual activity. It is interesting that women who believe in men's sexual accessibility are also more likely to experience sexual coercion. It is possible that women who endorse the traditional male stereotype are more likely to believe that their own lack of desire does not warrant resistance relative to a man's higher sexual needs, or that resistance may be somewhat futile against a man's indomitable desire for sex. The link between belief in men's sexual accessibility and sexual coercion is compelling but an explanation of the full gender-based process that underlies our results will require further investigation as our explanations remain tentative.

Regardless of the sexual activity examined, neither self-esteem nor assertiveness reliably predicted sexual coercion for men or women. These findings support previous studies of women's experiences (Stets & Pirog-Good, 1987), which found that lower self-esteem does not affect the likelihood of being sexually coerced, and that assertiveness, as a global trait, was not predictive of experiencing sexual coercion (Amik & Calhoun, 1987).

Similarly, a history of childhood sexual victimization was not predictive of sexual coercion regardless of gender or type of activity. Nurius and Norris (1996) suggest that the relationship between childhood sexual victimization and adult experiences of sexual coercion is not direct and therefore may not be apparent. Instead, the process may be similar to the one described by Mandoki and Burkhart (1989), who found that childhood sexual victimization was related to having an increased number of sexual partners, which in turn was a significant predictor of adult sexual victimization. The current study provides further support for this finding.

### **Limitations**

The current study joins many others in its use of undergraduate students as a convenience sample of participants. Although some research cited by Adams-Curtis and Forbes (2004) suggests that the sexual

behaviour of university students corresponds to that of their peers in the general population, we would be cautious in broadly accepting that generalization in the context of the current study.

By necessity, research on coercive sexual experiences is retrospective and accordingly, there are concerns about how accurately participants recall the events they report (Ross, 1989). Some researchers have limited this risk by asking participants about only those encounters that occurred in the past year, or only about the most serious incident in hopes of assessing more accurate memories (O'Sullivan et al., 1998). However, as noted by O'Sullivan and colleagues, studies that fail to examine the full array of encounters do not represent "typical" experiences of sexual coercion. Thus, while we must acknowledge that the current study is vulnerable to the risks of relying on retrospection, we believe that our study does depict the broad range of actual experiences that have occurred across time as participants perceive them.

We also recognize that the SSQ showed signs of weak internal consistency which may affect both the predictive capacity of the measure and our interpretation of findings associated with it. The 'gender specific sex drives' factor, which has only 3 items, is particularly problematic. We strongly recommend that sexuality researchers who are interested in exploring this construct consider revising the SSQ with additional items to increase internal consistency.

### **Conclusion**

The current study reiterates the importance of studying both women's and men's experiences of sexual coercion and is part of a growing body of research (Anderson & Aymami, 1993; Byers & O'Sullivan, 1998; Davies, 2002; O'Sullivan, Lawrence, & Byers, 1994; O'Sullivan & Byers, 1993) that demonstrates the potential errors associated with a rigid adherence to the sexual script depicting men as constantly desiring sex and women as resistant gatekeepers. Normative assumptions about sexual standards for women and men have most likely evolved over the years and we believe it is imperative for sexuality researchers to keep pace with the reality



of individuals' sexual attitudes and experiences as they require frequent contemporary re-examination.

Furthermore, our study draws attention to the overlap in contexts of sexual coercion for both men and women. Personal variables such as, relational and sexual history, may indeed be essential predictors of some forms of sexual coercion and should be included in future studies. Our results also suggest that many of the more psychological characteristics of victims we included in our study may not predict sexual coercion. One important exception, however, is the significance of victims' sex role beliefs as a promising potential predictor. Sexual script theory (Simon & Gagnon, 1986) suggests that strict adherence to scripted gender roles shape men's and women's attitudes and behaviours and influence the decisions they make when placed in situations that draw upon these scripts. As our findings indicate, the myth of men's sexual accessibility may predispose both men and women to experience sexual coercion, but we have argued that it may do so for entirely different reasons. Overall, our findings reinforce the value of including relational and sexual script variables when studying men's and women's sexual attitudes, cognitions and behaviours and demonstrate the need to explore further how these scripts shape sexual experience in general and sexual coercion in particular.

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