



Original article

Time-Varying Risk Factors and Sexual Aggression Perpetration
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A B S T R A C T

Purpose: Preventing sexual aggression (SA) can be informed by determining if time-varying risk factors differentiate men who follow different sexual aggression risk trajectories.**Methods:** Data are from a longitudinal study with 795 college males surveyed at the end of each of their 4 years of college in 2008–2011. Repeated measures general linear models tested if changes in risk factors corresponded with sexual aggression trajectory membership.**Results:** Changes in the risk factors corresponded with SA trajectories. Men who came to college with a history of SA but decreased their perpetration likelihood during college showed concurrent decreases in sexual compulsivity, impulsivity, hostile attitudes toward women, rape supportive beliefs, perceptions of peer approval of forced sex, and perceptions of peer pressure to have sex with many different women, and smaller increases in pornography use over their college years. Conversely, men who increased levels of SA over time demonstrated larger increases in risk factors in comparison to other trajectory groups.**Conclusions:** The odds that males engaged in sexual aggression corresponded with changes in key risk factors. Risk factors were not static and interventions designed to alter them may lead to changes in sexual aggression risk.

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IMPLICATIONS AND
CONTRIBUTION

This study elucidates key constructs that underlie sexual aggression (SA) initiation, desistance, and persistence among college men. Results suggest that SA is a tractable problem; not all men who perpetrate will continue to do so. Intervention programs should focus on malleable risk factors that are associated with changes in perpetration likelihood.

Recent research has indicated that sexual aggression (SA) perpetration among emerging adults follows different trajectories and is thus not a static phenomenon [1–4]. Our own research has indicated that most (71%) college men showed no to consistently low levels of SA. Among those who did perpetrate, their trajectories varied; 8% came to college without a history of SA but increased across the college years; 12% came to college with a prior history of SA but showed a steady decline across

their college years; and 9% showed a consistently high level of SA during adolescence and their college years [4]. These data indicate that there are different patterns of aggressive behaviors over time.

There has been consistent empirical support for both static and dynamic risk factors associated with SA perpetration [5]. Our prior work has used elements of the Theory of Triadic Influence [6], the Theory of Planned Behavior [7], and an expanded confluence model [8–10] to provide conceptual frameworks for examining the predictive roles of risk factors [4,11–16]. The Theory of Triadic Influence describes three types of influences on risky behaviors: intrapersonal, social/situational, and

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community/environmental [6]. The Theory of Planned Behavior includes three constructs, attitudes, perceived norms, and perceived control that are hypothesized to predict behavioral intentions or behavior [7]. The confluence model identified two primary risk factors, hostile masculinity and impersonal sex, and has been extended to include heavy alcohol use and peer norms [8–10]. This study is grounded in these theoretical underpinnings by conceptualizing risk as occurring across multiple ecological levels. It also is informed by criminal justice research that has called attention to the need to assess static and dynamic risk factors when predicting sexual offending recidivism [17].

Research has identified a number of risk factors that have been found to be associated with SA perpetration, yet many of these risk factors are static in nature, including antisocial personality characteristics and exposure to child abuse and/or interparental violence [5]. Some established risk factors are dynamic in nature and are thus the foci of the current investigation. Dynamic intrapersonal risk factors found to be associated with SA perpetration include impulsivity [18], sexual compulsivity [19], hostile attitudes toward women [4], rape supportive beliefs [4,13], and heavy alcohol use [4,20–22]. Dynamic social level risk factors found to be associated with SA have included multiple sexual partners [23–25], peer pressure to engage in high levels of sexual activity [9], and peer approval of sexual violence [4,10,13,26–28]. Dynamic environmental risk factors for SA have been studied less, but there is empirical support for pornography exposure increasing the likelihood for perpetration [29,30].

Although there has been consistent empirical support for these risk factors' associations with SA, studies have not typically assessed if risk factors correspond with changes in SA perpetration risk. Hall et al. [2] found that persistent sexual coercers were higher than desistors and initiators on hostile attitudes toward women. Abbey and McAuslan [1] found that repeat offenders had the highest levels of hostile attitudes toward women, number of consensual sexual partners, and heavy alcohol use, followed by single offenders and then nonoffenders. Neither of these studies, however, determined if changes in risk factors across time coincided with changes in perpetration risk.

The purpose of this study was to determine if changes in risk factors for SA were related to changes in SA likelihood. Findings could inform preventive interventions by elucidating risk factors that not only are malleable but also might lead to changes in SA risk. Because we were interested in assessing how changes on risk factors corresponded to changes in SA likelihood, we only included time-varying and hence potentially malleable risk factors, including attitudes supportive of SA, peer norms supportive of SA, heavy drinking, impersonal sex, impulsivity, and sexual compulsivity.

Methods

Participants and procedures

All first-year, male students ($N = 1,472$) enrolled at a large southeastern university were sent personal e-mails in March 2008 requesting their participation in the study. Students also were recruited with notices in the student newspaper and flyers distributed around campus. Students were invited to come to the student health center between 9:00 A.M. and 4:00 P.M. during the upcoming week to complete confidential, 20- to 30-minute self-report surveys on men's attitudes and behaviors regarding

relationships with women. Within 1 week, 800 students completed surveys after providing written informed consent.

University institutional review board approval and a Certificate of Confidentiality from the National Institutes of Health were obtained before data collection. After completing surveys, participants deposited them into a locked box, received payment for their participation (\$20.00 at waves 1 and 2 and \$25.00 at waves 3 and 4) and were provided a referral sheet of counseling resources. At waves 2, 3, and 4, participants were provided survey packets with confidential, unique codes that linked their surveys. No personal identifiers were included on the surveys.

The initial sample consisted of 800 men. Five individuals were excluded because they were <18 years of age or >34 years at wave 1. Approximately, three quarters of the sample (72%) completed surveys at wave 4, and these 572 males comprised the analytic sample. Attrition analyses indicated that participants with more sexual partners were less likely to have completed follow-up surveys at wave 4, $F(1, 794) = 10.89, p < .001$. No other variables were associated with attrition at wave 4.

Participants' average age was 18.56 years at wave 1 (standard deviation = .51) and most (89%) were white. The sample was representative of the population of first-year male students in terms of age and race based on data provided from the Office of Institutional Research.

Measures

All measures used in the analyses have established reliability and validity. Cronbach alpha coefficients for this sample are provided in the following section.

SA trajectory. SA was assessed using two different time boundaries for recall at each of the four waves. At wave 1, the time frames were before entering college and during the first academic year. At waves 2–4, the reporting timeframes were the summer between the respective academic years and during the respective academic year. The revised Sexual Experiences Survey [31], the most widely used and validated measure of perpetration among college students, was used to assess SA. The 35-item scale assesses for unwanted sexual contact, sexual coercion, attempted rape, and completed rape. A score was computed that accounted for both severity and frequency of SA, with higher scores reflecting more severe and frequent SA [4].

Latent growth mixture modeling indicated four trajectory class groups: males who engaged in consistently no or low levels of SA (low SA group) across all time points, males who increased in their likelihood of perpetration over the time points (increasing SA group), males who had perpetrated before college but desisted in their perpetration behaviors (decreasing SA group) and males who engaged in consistently high levels of SA both before and during college (high SA group) [4].

Sexual compulsivity. The 10-item Sexual Compulsivity Scale [32] assessed for sexual preoccupations and intrusive thoughts (e.g., "I feel that sexual thoughts and feelings are stronger than I am;" $\alpha = .83$ [wave 1] and $.86$ [wave 4]). Items were answered on a 1–4 scale, with higher scores indicating greater sexual compulsivity.

Impulsivity. The 19-item impulsivity questionnaire [33] assessed for impulsive behaviors (e.g., "I do and say things without stopping to think;" $\alpha = .79$ [wave 1] and $.81$ [wave 4]). Items were

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