

ORIGINAL RESEARCH—PSYCHOLOGY

Insecure Attachment Style and Dysfunctional Sexual Beliefs Predict Sexual Coercion Proclivity in University Men

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ABSTRACT

Introduction. Past studies have shown an association between low sexual functioning and engaging in sexually coercive behaviors among men. The mechanism of this relationship is not well understood. Moreover, most studies in this area have been done in incarcerated sex offenders.

Aims. The aim of the current study was to investigate the role of potential distal predictors of sexual coercion, including insecure attachment style and dysfunctional sexual beliefs, in mediating the relationship between sexual functioning and sexual coercion. The study also seeks to extend past findings to a novel non-forensic population.

Methods. Male university students ($N = 367$) anonymously completed online questionnaires.

Main Outcome Measures. Participants completed the Sexual Experiences Survey, Improved Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale, Hostility Towards Women Scale, Likelihood of Rape Item, Experiences in Close Relationships Scale, Dysfunctional Sexual Beliefs Scale, and Brief Sexual Functioning Questionnaire.

Results. Sexual functioning was not significantly associated with sexually coercive behaviors in our sample ($r = 0.08$, $P = 0.247$), though a significant correlation between sexual functioning and rape myth acceptance was found ($r = 0.18$, $P = 0.007$). Path analysis of all variables showed that the likelihood of rape item was the strongest correlate of sexually coercive behaviors ($\beta = 0.34$, $P < 0.001$), while dysfunctional sexual beliefs appeared to mediate the association between anxious attachment and likelihood of rape item score. Anxious ($r = -0.27$, $P = 0.001$) and avoidant ($r = -0.19$, $P = 0.004$) attachment also correlated significantly with lower sexual functioning.

Conclusions. These findings suggest the relationship between sexual functioning and sexual coercion may be less robust than previously reported, and may be due to a shared association with other factors. The results elaborate on the interrelation between attachment style and dysfunctional sexual beliefs as predictors of sexual coercion proclivity, suggesting avenues for further research. **Dang SS and Gorzalka BB. Insecure attachment style and dysfunctional sexual beliefs predict sexual coercion proclivity in university men. Sex Med 2015;3:99–108.**

Key Words. Sexual Coercion; Attachment Style; Dysfunctional Sexual Beliefs; Sexual Functioning; University Students

Introduction

Sexual coercion is a broad term that can refer to a wide range of behaviors, ranging from the use of manipulation and pressure to obtain sexual

activity to violent sexual assault. One persistent finding of research on this topic is the association between sexually coercive behaviors, including both rape and child molestation, and sexual dysfunctions. This finding has been consistent across

multiple studies in inmate samples [1,2] and has also been seen in some community populations. For example, Carvalho et al. [3] reported that male undergraduate university students high in sexual aggression had significantly higher levels of dysfunction in erectile functioning and ejaculation.

The mechanism of the association between sexual coercion and sexual functioning has not been well explained. It has been suggested that sexual dysfunctions may be a direct cause of increased coercive behaviors, perhaps because of the aggressor's response to sexual performance failure [3]. This is potentially supported by sexual performance failures during sexual assault being associated with more physical violence [4] and erectile dysfunction in response to fear of performance failure predicting sexual coercion [5]. However, it is possible that both increased sexual coercion proclivity and decreased sexual functioning are caused by disruptions to cognitions, emotions, and beliefs related to sexuality, gender roles, and interpersonal relationships. This "third-variable" explanation is consistent with evidence showing that sexual coercion is associated with deficits in a range of psychosocial variables [6–9].

Insecure attachment style appears to be one possible factor that may explain the shared variance between sexual coercion and sexual functioning. A growing body of evidence suggests that men who engage in sexual coercion often display higher levels of attachment-related difficulties. Incarcerated sex offenders have been found to score higher on insecure attachment compared with nonsexual offenders [10,11]. Higher insecure childhood attachment and greater levels of early maladaptive schemas were correlated with engagement in sexually aggressive behaviors in male undergraduate students [12,13]. Given that insecure attachment style develops from disruptions to early caregiver experiences [14,15], these findings are unsurprising in light of the fact that sexual offenders also tend to have parents who were uncaring and abusive [11,16]. There is also an expanding body of evidence to suggest that attachment is associated with variations in sexual functioning [17–19]. Though the relationship between sexual functioning and attachment style has primarily been investigated in women, unpublished data from our group suggest a similar pattern may exist in men.

Another potential predictive factor may be dysfunctional sexual beliefs: cognitions, attitudes, and expectations about sexuality [20]. In men, these include sexual conservatism, need for sexual control, importance of sexual competency, impor-

tance of satisfying sexual partners, and restriction on types of acceptable sexual activities. Some of these beliefs appear similar to negative views of sexuality and stereotypical view of gender roles seen among sex offenders [7,10], and may reflect the manifestation of early maladaptive schemas in the sexual domain [14]. Dysfunctional sexual beliefs have been shown to distinguish between men with and without diagnosable sexual dysfunctions [21]. These findings suggest that dysfunctional sexual beliefs may mediate the association between attachment style, sexual functioning, and sexual coercion.

The current study will employ a variety of measures to assess cognitive, emotional, and motivational aspects of sexual coercion proclivity. Acceptance of rape myths [22,23] and hostility toward women [24] will be used as cognitive and emotional indicators, respectively. A likelihood of rape measure, which has been suggested to reflect level of desire and interest toward sexual coercion [25], will also be used.

Aims

The current study seeks to extend existing data on the association between sexual coercion and sexual functioning, and examine the extent to which attachment style and dysfunctional sexual beliefs may mediate this association in a population of university men.

Methods

Participants

Participants for this study were male undergraduate students at a major Canadian university. In total, 412 participants consented to participate in the study and completed the questionnaire battery. Of these, 45 were excluded for not indicating exclusively or primarily heterosexual as their sexual orientation ($N = 367$). Only male heterosexual participants were included as some of the sexual coercion measures used in this study have been validated in heterosexual male populations and contain items relevant only to heterosexual sexual interactions with males as the sexual aggressor. Demographic variables of the participants are presented in Table 1, and in all cases were self-reported.

Sexual coercion commission/admission rates, as measured by the Sexual Experiences Survey—Male/Perpetrator Form (SES) [26], are presented

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