



Perceived female infidelity and male sexual coercion concerning first sex in Chinese college students' dating relationships: The mediating role of male partners' attachment insecurity

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 1 November 2016

Received in revised form 5 February 2017

Accepted 6 February 2017

Available online 9 February 2017

Keywords:

Female infidelity

Male sexual coercion

Attachment insecurity

First sex

ABSTRACT

Previous studies have shown that female infidelity, attachment insecurity, and male sexual coercion in intimate relationships are empirically related to each other. However, the mechanisms that are involved remain poorly understood. The study aimed to examine two mediating models of male sexual coercion concerning first sex in Chinese college students' dating relationships (perceived female infidelity or attachment insecurity as the mediator), with both male and female participants (not using dyadic data). A total of 927 validly completed questionnaires provided the data; the respondents were recruited by purposive snowball sampling of students attending colleges in five of China's largest cities who were currently in a romantic relationship. First, with both the male and female samples, perceived female infidelity was positively correlated with violence threat coercive tactics; and, with the male sample only, it was positively correlated with emotional manipulation coercive tactics. Second, with the male sample only, male partners' attachment insecurity (anxiety and avoidance) were positively correlated with perceived female infidelity. Third, male partners' attachment anxiety fully mediated the relationship between perceived female infidelity and emotional manipulation coercive tactics. These findings suggest how the proximate and ultimate causes of sexual coercion in intimate relationships interact. Implications for clinical practice are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Sexual coercion in dating relationships is not a single behavior or simple problem, and it cannot be explained by a single theory (Johnson & Sigler, 1997). The academics tend to integrate different perspectives to explain and predict sexual coercion, especially within intimate relationships. Goetz, Shackelford, and Camilleri (2008) highlight the importance of integrating multiple levels of analysis when studying males' sexual coercion of their intimate partners. They argue that proximate (feminist) theory and ultimate (evolutionary) theory allow different levels of analysis and can complement each other. Goetz and Shackelford (2009) successfully tested this integrative hypothesis. They explored men's attempts to dominate and control their partners (proximate cause) and suspicions about their partners' infidelity as predictors of men's sexual coercion of their intimate partners; the results indicated that perceived female infidelity and male controlling behavior consistently predict male sexual coercion of their partners. Hazan and Shaver (1994) argued that "a theoretical integration of research findings

on close relationships is neither premature nor impossible and that attachment theory can provide the core constructs of such an integrative framework" (p.18). In the present study, we wanted to explore how proximate (attachment) theory and ultimate (evolutionary) theory could together explain the complicated sexual coercive behavior found in intimate relationships. A review of the literature on the relationship between female infidelity, male sexual coercion in intimate relationships, and attachment insecurity is as follows.

1.1. Female infidelity and male sexual coercion in intimate relationships

Sperm competition theory provides us with an evolutionary perspective to help us understand sexual coercion in long-term relationships. Like other socially monogamous species, male humans have psychological mechanisms designed to solve adaptive problems, such as female infidelity, uncertainty about paternity, and sperm competition (Shackelford & Goetz, 2007). Males compete not only with each other for mates but also with rivals at the level of sperm. Sperm competition theory proposes that if females mate concurrently with two or more males, there are several selection pressures on males as only one sperm can fertilize an egg. According to this theory, when men encounter risk of sperm competition—such as perceived or actual female

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infidelity or separation—they adopt mate retention tactics to maintain their relationships when faced with such problems as a partner's sexual rejection. Goetz et al. (2008) suggested that “sexual rejection by a woman might signal to her partner strategic interference and could activate psychology and behavior associated with sexual coercion” (p. 9). Moreover, when males perceive a greater risk of sperm competition, they are distressed and may persist in their response to sexual rejection. Shackelford, Goetz, McKibbin, and Starratt (2007) found that men who spend a greater amount of time away from their partners since last copulating with them report greater distress, greater sexual interest in their partner, and more persistence in response to sexual rejection.

Many studies have provided evidence of the strong relationship between female infidelity and intimate partner violence (IPV), sexual coercion and even homicide (Shackelford, Buss, & Weekes-Shackelford, 2003). For example, some studies have shown that infidelity is particularly significant as a source of conflict associated with violence. Infidelity concerns, a specific form of jealousy, have been found to be the immediate trigger for episodes of extreme violence that result in injuries to intimate partners (Giordano, Copp, Longmore, & Manning, 2015; Nemeth, Bonomi, Lee, & Ludwin, 2012). Infidelity has been found to be associated with a high proportion of the relationships affected by IPV (Johnson, Manning, Giordano, & Longmore, 2015). It should be noted that in these studies “infidelity” usually means “males' perceptions of their female partners' sexual infidelity.” Kaighobadi et al. (2009) found that men who perceived themselves to be at greater risk of partner infidelity perpetrated more partner-directed violence. Hatcher et al. (2013) suggested that the triggers of IPV include the perceived sexual infidelity of partners.

The relation between perceived female infidelity and sexual coercion by males in intimate relationships has also been empirically tested. Goetz and Shackelford (2006) found that sexual coercion in the context of intimate relationships may function as a sperm competition tactic. Male sexual coercion in an intimate relationship is positively related to male partners' perceived female infidelity. Starratt, Goetz, Shackelford, McKibbin & Stewart-Williams (2008) suggested that accusing a partner of sexual infidelity was most useful in predicting sexual coercion. Conroy (2014) demonstrated that the perception of a partner's infidelity was significantly associated with both an individual's and their partner's risk for sexual coercion and physical abuse. These findings suggest that there is a strong relation between perceived female infidelity and male sexual coercion in intimate relationships. Researchers have also examined possible moderators and mediators of this relationship. For example, Starratt, Popp & Shackelford (2008) found that men's perceptions of their partner's infidelity are positively related to sexual coercion by men only in those relationships in which the man perceives himself to be as desirable as, or more desirable than, his partner.

1.2. Attachment insecurity and male sexual coercion in intimate relationships

By focusing on affect regulation in close relationships, attachment theory can help us understand the apparent contradiction between intimacy and violence, that is, to understand how violence can be related to love and intimacy (Mayseless, 1991). Attachment is a motivational model that can be activated under conditions in which a relationship itself seems to be under stress and threat (Feeney, 1998; Hazan & Shaver, 1994); and it has been empirically shown to be related to various types of violence in intimate relationships. For example, Bond and Bond (2004) found that male partners' anxious attachment style was a significant predictor of violent victimization of females. Rapoza and Baker (2008) found that physically violent men reported anxious attachment. Dutton and White (2012) suggested that attachment insecurity increases the likelihood of aggression in adolescents and IPV in adults. However, few researchers have employed attachment theory to explain the phenomenon of sexual coercion in intimate relationships. The social

psychology perspectives (such as attachment theory) mostly remain at the level of conceptual or theoretical hypotheses concerning sexual coercion in dating relationships (Baumeister, 2001; Byers & Wang, 2004; Davis, 2006). Recently, He and Tsang (2014) found that, with both male and female samples, male partners' anxious attachment style significantly and positively predicted emotional manipulation coercive tactics. With the female sample, two of the male partners' attachment styles (anxious and avoidant) positively predicted violence threat coercive tactics; and the male partners' avoidant attachment style positively predicted defection threat coercive tactics.

1.3. Infidelity and attachment insecurity

Both of the insecure attachment styles (anxious attachment and avoidant attachment) have been empirically shown to be linked with infidelity. Fish, Pavkov, Wetchler, and Bercik (2012) found that attachment anxiety and avoidance were significantly related to infidelity at both bivariate and multivariate levels of analysis. Frias, Brassard, and Shaver (2014) found that the association between childhood sexual abuse and perceived-partner extradyadic involvement was partially mediated by both attachment anxiety and avoidance. Shimberg, Josephs, and Grace (2016) found that college students who are with secure attachment are more likely to oppose sexual behavior outside of their dating relationships.

A strong link between anxious attachment and infidelity (self and perceived partners') has been found in most previous studies. As regards the link with self-infidelity, Bogaert and Sadava (2002) found that respondents who scored higher on an anxious attachment index had more lifetime partners and more infidelity. Russell, Baker, and McNulty (2013) found that spouses were more likely to commit adultery when either they or their partners had a higher level of attachment anxiety. Weiser and Weigel (2015) found that individuals with higher levels of attachment anxiety appear to be more likely to be unfaithful to their partners. As regards the link with the perceived infidelity of a partner, Kruger et al. (2013) found that higher levels of attachment anxiety were associated with higher ratings for 18 of 27 behaviors that their participants judged to be cheating on a long-term partner. Reed, Tolman, and Safer (2015) suggested that attachment style influences intrusive electronic dating behaviors (such as looking at a dating partner's private electronic information without permission), which reflected the possibility of infidelity.

Some studies have suggested that there is a link between avoidance attachment and infidelity. For example, Beaulieu-Pelletier, Philippe, Lecours, and Couture (2011) found that attachment avoidance increases people's irritation relative to their partner's desire for engagement which, in turn, increases the likelihood of their engaging in extradyadic sex. DeWall et al. (2011) showed that people with high levels of dispositional avoidant attachment had more permissive attitudes toward infidelity than did those with low levels of dispositional avoidant attachment. Avoidant attachment is predictive of a broad spectrum of responses indicative of interest in alternatives and a propensity to be unfaithful. Schmitt and Jonason (2015) found that self-reports of having an unfaithful sexual personality were linked to dismissing attachment in both men and women.

1.4. Cultural context and studies of sexual coercion in the intimate relationships of Chinese couples

When to first have sex can be a key issue for Chinese dating couples, for great importance is attached to a bride's virginity (as it long has been in China). The phenomenon is known as “virginal membrane adoration” or “the virginity complex” and is found among both males and females (Pan, 2004); thus, men want to marry a virgin and women wish to retain their virginity until marriage. Generally speaking, Chinese people first have sex somewhat later than most of their Western counterparts: the sexual debuts of Chinese people normally occur when they are

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