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Predictors of sexual aggression in adolescents: Gender dominance vs. rape supportive attitudes

Nieves Moyano^a, Fredy S. Monge^b, Juan Carlos Sierra^{c,*}

^a Universidad de Especialidades Espíritu Santo, Guayaquil, Ecuador

^b Universidad Nacional de San Antonio Abad del Cusco, Perú

^c Centro de Investigación Mente, Cerebro y Comportamiento (CIMCYC), Universidad de Granada, España

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the relationship between sexual double standard and rape supportive attitudes in regard to an individual's likelihood to perpetrate sexual aggression. We examined an adolescent sample of 448 boys from Peru, of whom 148 (33.3%) reported to have committed sexual aggression. Sexual contact with an unwilling partner was perpetrated by 24.8% of the total sample, sexual coercion by 14.3%, attempted rape by 12.5%, and finally, rape was perpetrated by 10.3%. In all these types of aggression, the most frequent victim was a dating partner. Compared to non-aggressors, male aggressors reported more sexual double standard and supportive attitudes towards rape. Logistic regression analyses revealed that the most relevant variable in the prediction of sexual aggression was the subject having been a victim of sexual abuse during adolescence and having rape supportive attitudes. Our findings suggest that violent attitudes are more important than the endorsement of non-egalitarian beliefs (sexual double standard) in the perpetration of sexual violence. These findings provide data from Peru, which contribute to the worldwide data on risk factors for sexual aggression in adolescent males.

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Predictores de la agresión sexual en adolescentes: dominancia de género vs. actitudes favorables hacia la violación

RESUMEN

Este estudio explora la relación entre el doble estándar sexual y las actitudes favorables hacia la violación en el riesgo de llevar a cabo un acto de agresión sexual. Se examinó una muestra de adolescentes formada por 448 chicos de Perú, de los cuales 148 (33.3%) informaron haber perpetrado agresión sexual. En concreto, el 24.8% informó haber perpetrado contactos sexuales sin el consentimiento de la víctima, el 14.3% había cometido actos de coerción sexual, el 12.5% intentó llevar a cabo violación y el 10.3% perpetró violación. La víctima más común de este tipo de abusos fueron las parejas ocasionales. En comparación con el grupo que nunca había agredido, los varones agresores informaron de mayor doble moral sexual y actitudes más positivas hacia la violación. Un análisis de regresión logística reveló que la variable más importante en la predicción de la agresión sexual fue haber sido víctima de abuso sexual durante la adolescencia y tener una actitud positiva hacia la violación. Los resultados sugieren que las actitudes hacia la violencia son más importantes que las creencias no igualitarias (doble moral sexual) en la realización de conductas sexuales violentas. Este hallazgo, al ofrecer información de Perú, se añade a los datos existentes a nivel mundial sobre los factores de riesgo de la agresión sexual en adolescentes varones.

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* Corresponding author. Facultad de Psicología, Campus de Cartuja, s/n. 18011. Granada, Spain.

E-mail address: jcsierra@ugr.es (J.C. Sierra).

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Sexual aggression is a widespread phenomenon in societies and cultures throughout the world. Prevalence rates, however, vary from country to country. According to a study conducted by the World Health Organization (WHO) with data from ten countries,

from 13% (Japan) to 62% (Peru) of women reported physical victimization in their lifetime (García-Moreno, Jansen, Ellsberg, Heise, & Watts, 2006). These data highlight the striking prevalence rates of violence in Latin American countries, and particularly in Peru. Another study by Cáceres (2005) showed that 46% of Peruvian women aged 16–30 reported non-consensual sex by an opposite-sex perpetrator at least once in their lifetime.

These high rates of sexual aggression have been observed at younger ages. For example, research coordinated by the WHO found that 23% of women from Lima and 47% of women from Cuzco reported having suffered sexual victimization by age fifteen (Güezmes & Vargas, 2003). More recent data from the Ministry of Women and Vulnerable Populations (Ministerio de la Mujer y Poblaciones Vulnerables, MIMP, 2015) showed that there had been 28,790 cases of family and sexual violence in Peru from January to June 2015. Therefore, research analyzing the risk factors associated with high prevalence rates of sexual aggression in countries such as Peru is both timely and necessary.

However, despite the fact that sexual violence prevention programs increasingly target younger ages, there has been little research with a sample population of adolescents. This is relevant because the endorsement of certain dominant attitudes, such as sexual double standard, which is often linked to dating violence, are developed and established at early ages (Gallagher & Parrott, 2011; Greene & Faulkner, 2005; Kreager & Staff, 2009; Lyons, Giordano, Manning, & Longmore, 2011; Marston & King, 2006; Sanchez, Fetterolf, & Rudman, 2012). In particular, teenage males are often exposed to peer pressure and thus tend to behave according to social and gender expectations, as they develop their “masculine identity” (Lees, 2002). This leads boys to be especially vulnerable to the development of certain forms of violent behaviors (Shen, Chiu, & Gao, 2012).

Sexual double standard has been defined as the appropriateness of certain sexual behaviors when they are performed by men, than when they are performed by women (Fasula, Carry, & Miller, 2014; Milhausen & Herold, 2002). In other words, although women are stigmatized for engaged in explicit sexual behaviors, these behaviors are encouraged in men in similar sexual situations. The conceptualization of certain sexual behaviors as appropriate or inappropriate is often guided by cultural expectations (see Byers, 1996; Emmers-Sommer et al., 2010). In this regard, Latin American countries are a special case, as they often endorse relatively more rigid gender roles (Gutiérrez-Quintanilla, Rojas-García, & Sierra, 2010; Raffaelli & Ontai, 2001).

Various studies have shown that rape attitudes play an important role in sexual violence (see Sierra, Bermúdez, Buéla-Casal, & Salinas, 2014), as they “serve to deny and justify male sexual aggression against women” (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994, p. 134). Research on sexual offenders has conceptualized rape attitudes in terms of the cognitions that justify why women become victims of rape. According to Johnson, Kuck, and Schander (1997), most rape myths and rape-accepting attitudes fit into one of three categories: (1) blaming the victim, (2) excusing the perpetrator of responsibility for the assault, and (3) justification for the assault. The association between supportive rape attitudes and the perpetration of sexual aggression, through self-reported measures, has been demonstrated in college students and community samples of male adults (i.e., DeGue, DeLillo, & Scalora, 2010; Helmus, Hanson, Thornton, Babchishin, & Harris, 2012). Furthermore, adolescents are a vulnerable population, as rape is often experienced for the first time in these years (Jewkes & Sikweyiya, 2013).

A direct positive relationship was found between victimization and relational violence behavior in adolescents (Povedano, Cava, Monreal, Varela, & Musitu, 2015). Research indicates that previous experiences of sexual victimization are often associated with the subsequent perpetration of sexual violence, as shown in college

men (e.g., Russell & Oswald, 2002) and college women (Russell & Oswald, 2001; Shea, 1998). This is known as the cycle of sexual coercion (Gannon, Rose, & Ward, 2008; Moyano & Sierra, 2015; Ward & Beech, 2006). Findings from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health reflect that victimization in adolescents is predictive of later perpetration of violence in adulthood (Gomez, Speizer, & Moracco, 2011).

The present study investigated the sexual double standard and rape supportive attitudes, factors that may contribute to an increased risk of the perpetration of sexual aggression in a sample of adolescent males from Peru. In addition, the role of self-reported adolescent sexual victimization was explored. The consideration of these variables is fundamental for promoting sexual health programs targeting this population. Cultural values shape conceptions of healthy sexuality, and cultural practices promote these ideals in development (Manago, Greenfield, Kim, & Ward, 2014).

Therefore, this study had the following objectives: (1) to compare boys who reported to have perpetrated sexual aggression with boys who reported to have not, based on their endorsement of sexual double standard and supportive attitudes towards rape; (2) to determine which of these factors (sexual double standard or supportive attitudes towards rape) best predicts sexual aggression in boys.

Previous research on the adult population has shown that, compared to other men, those who report more traditional masculinity ideologies are more likely to report having perpetrated violence or sexual coercion (Marín, Gómez, Tschann, & Gregorich, 1997; Santana, Raj, Decker, La Marche, & Silverman, 2006; Sierra, Gutiérrez-Quintanilla, Bermúdez, & Buéla-Casal, 2009). Conversely, in comparison to less egalitarian men, men with more egalitarian gender role ideologies report fewer instances of physical aggression against their intimate partners (Fitzpatrick, Salgado, Suvak, King, & King, 2004). Therefore, the following hypotheses were proposed and tested:

H1. Boys who report sexual aggression will report more sexual double standard and a more supportive attitude towards rape than non-aggressors.

H2. Self-reported sexual aggression will be predicted by sexual double standard and supportive attitude towards rape.

Method

Participants

We recruited an initial sample composed of 500 Peruvian male adolescents, aged between 14 and 17 years. Data from 52 participants were excluded because of missing values (i.e., when the questionnaire was incomplete or more than 75% of the items had not been answered). This left a final sample of 448. Participants were recruited by incidental sampling from one public secondary school in Cusco, Peru. School was only for boys from a low to medium socioeconomic level families. Of the sample, 33% of participants ($n = 148$) reported having engaged in sexual aggression at least once (i.e., sexual aggressors). As shown in Table 1, there were no significant differences between sexual aggressors and individuals who reported to have never perpetrated sexual aggression (i.e., non-aggressors) in age, residence area (urban or rural), or religious attendance (from never to everyday).

Measures

We used a *Socio-demographic Questionnaire* that collected data about sex, age, residence area, religious attendance, who they live with, and parents' job.

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