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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Studying sexual coercion in a lab: Adaptation and validation of the French version of the ‘‘date rape analogue task’’[☆]

M. Benbouriche^{a,b,1,*}

^a École de criminologie, université de Montréal, 3150, rue Jean-Brillant, H3T 1N8 Montréal, Québec, Canada

^b EA 1285, laboratoire « LP3C », université Rennes 2, place du recteur-Henri-Le-Moal, CS 24307, 35043 Rennes cedex, France

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Summary

Introduction. – For obvious reasons, a situation of sexual coercion can never be directly studied. In order to approach as closely as possible such a situation, different proxies have been developed (written vignette, audiotape, videotape and confederates). Nevertheless, only written vignettes are available for French-speaking researchers interested in studying situations of sexual coercion.

Aim. – The aim of this research is thus to introduce and to validate the French version of an audiotape commonly used in research, the ‘‘date rape analogue task’’.

Method. – As part of a research about the effects of alcohol and sexual arousal in sexual coercion, 153 participants were recruited from the general population.

Results. – Results support the construct validity of the French version. While the operationalization of a situation of sexual coercion remains a major challenge, this is the first validated audiotape available in French. This experimental stimulus is particularly relevant for studying the perceptual, emotional, cognitive and contextual determinants underlying decision-making relative to the use of coercive strategies, as they may be experienced from individuals’ standpoints.

Conclusion. – New research is all the more important considering that for a prevention program to be fully effective, processes and mechanisms that explain sexual coercion in situ should be taken into account.

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* Correspondence. Department of Psychology, Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Neurosciences, Wayne State University, 5057 Woodward, MI 48202 Detroit, USA.

E-mail address: massil.benbouriche@wayne.edu

¹ M. Benbouriche is now at the Wayne State University.

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Introduction

Various studies on the self-reported incidence of sexual coercion have shown, with an alarming consistency, the extent of the phenomenon (see Benbouriche and Parent, in this issue). Furthermore, if cross-sectional studies have identified numerous risk factors, more studies are needed to understand the perceptual, emotional, cognitive and contextual determinants underlying decision-making relative to the use of coercive strategies. Because sexual coercion is a situated phenomenon (i.e., occurring in a given situation), it is essential to specify the mechanisms and processes likely to occur in a natural setting, as they may be experienced from individuals' standpoints. However, for obvious ethical reasons, a situation of sexual coercion can never be directly studied (Abbey and Wegner, 2015). Thus, the operationalization of such a situation and the development of valid proxies remain a crucial issue.

Operationalization and experimental stimulus

During the operationalization process, choices must be made. Because all possible and imaginable situations can't be studied with a unique experimental stimulus (commonly called "proxy"), the operationalization is necessarily reductive. Nevertheless, it provides a standardized situation, which allows studying the processes and mechanisms underlying a given phenomenon (e.g., sexual coercion) under controlled conditions.

When the objective is to study mechanisms and processes as they are likely to occur in a natural setting, and therefore to approach as closely as possible the behaviors and reactions individuals may manifest in a given situation, it is essential for an experimental stimulus to meet the requirements for ecological validity. The latter (i.e., the ability for an experimental stimulus to depict a given situation as it might actually occur in real life) is an important factor for the generalizability of the observed results to other situations, and more importantly "outside the lab".

Studying sexual coercion: available proxies

In order to approach as closely as possible a situation of sexual coercion, different proxies have been developed: written vignette, audiotape, videotape and confederates (for a detailed discussion about their specific advantages and disadvantages, see Abbey and Wegner, 2015).

Given the possibility they offer for a quick and easy development, written vignettes are by far the most used. Participants are usually asked about their likelihood of behaving in a specific way if they were in the same situation, their likelihood of using a particular coercive strategy, or the justification for using coercive strategies in the situation depicted in the written vignette or in a similar situation. As such, the focus is always on studying participants' behavioral intentions or perceptions of a given situation, rather than studying an actual behavior of sexual coercion.

Operationalization of sexual coercion with an audio stimulus

Despite the lack of visual cues, the audiotape has many advantages over the other proxies. Firstly, the voices of professional actors that compose the soundtrack allow for subtle variations in tone as well as for the expression of emotions. The latter are an interesting addition to operationalization efforts since they may not be as easily communicated with written vignettes.

Secondly, in terms of external validity, an audio stimulus makes it possible to have a behavioral measure *per se*. The audiotape indeed requires for individuals to be able to perceive and treat social cues in order to decide whether a woman is interested in having sex or not. Because individuals are likely to use similar social information processing in a real-life situation, the use of an audiotape appears to be particularly relevant for studying processes and behaviors as they may occur in a natural setting (Abbey and Wegner, 2015; Benbouriche et al., submitted, Bernat et al., 1999).

Thirdly, when using response latency as main measure, it has been suggested that the use of an audiotape would make experimental expectations less transparent, thus minimizing the impact of social desirability on participants' responses (Bernat et al., 1997).

Finally, from a more pragmatic point of view, although the use of an audiotape does not completely eliminate the need for participants to read throughout the entire research protocol, it reduces it. This may be particularly useful for research manipulating specific factors such as alcohol acute intoxication, which results in a narrowed attention and a limited ability to focus.

Aim

The aim of this research is to present and validate the French version of an audiotape commonly used in research, the "date rape analogue task".

Adaptation and development of the French version of the "date rape analogue task"

The French version is adapted from the audiotape developed by Marx and Gross (1995) and validated by Bernat et al. (1997). In its original version, this audiotape consists of a dialogue of 390 seconds between a man and a woman that gradually evolves from a consenting social interaction to rape. The measure used as main dependent variable is the response latency, that is the time required for the participant to indicate that the man portrayed in the scenario should refrain from making further sexual advances. Results, based on the convergent validity of response latency with past sexual coercion, tolerant attitudes toward sexual coercion and acceptance of interpersonal violence support its construct validity (Bernat et al., 1997). Moreover, Bernat et al. (1997) report a test-retest reliability coefficient of 0.87 over a two-week interval as well as no correlation with a social desirability measure.

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