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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Insecure attachment and use of sexual coercion in male university students: Negative urgency as an explanatory mechanism[☆]



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Impulsivity;
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Summary

Introduction. – The use of sexual coercion by university students is a prevalent and serious phenomenon. Studies have indicated that insecure attachment (i.e., attachment anxiety and avoidance) is related to sexual coercion perpetration, but the mechanisms explaining this association remain misunderstood. Negative urgency, which refers to the tendency to react impulsively when experiencing intense negative emotions, may be one of these mechanisms.

Objective. – The objective of the present study is to determine the role played by negative urgency in the relationship between attachment insecurity and past use of sexual coercion.

Method. – Ninety-seven male university students completed online questionnaires measuring attachment style, negative urgency and past use of sexual coercion.

Results. – Mediation analyses revealed that attachment anxiety – but not attachment avoidance – predicted past use of sexual coercion via negative urgency. Ultimately, this study suggests that the propensity to act impulsively under the effect of negative emotions reported by anxiously attached men may constitute a risk factor for sexual coercion perpetration.

Discussion. – This study identifies negative urgency and anxious attachment as promising intervention targets to prevent the perpetration of sexual coercion and highlights the importance of verifying the causal role of these factors with longitudinal studies.

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Introduction

Sexual coercion can be defined as the use of any strategy (e.g., verbal pressure, physical force, intoxication of the victim, use of a position of authority) to obtain sexual contacts (i.e., ranging from kisses to sexual intercourse) with a non-consenting partner (Brousseau et al., 2011). It is a prevalent societal problem, with 20–64% of men reporting having used sexual coercion in the past (Abbey et al., 2007, Russell and King, 2016) and 22–73% of women reporting having been victims of sexual coercion in their lifetime (De Visser et al., 2014, Turchik and Hassija, 2014). To better prevent sexual coercion, it is important to understand the mechanisms that may explain its use.

One of the factors playing a role in predicting sexual coercion is attachment. The attachment theory (Ainsworth, 1989, Bowlby, 1982) postulates that children's first relationship with their caregiver affects the way they experience intimate relationships throughout their lives. Adult attachment is operationalized through two dimensions: attachment anxiety, underlain by negative perceptions of oneself, and attachment avoidance, underlain by negative perceptions of others (Bartholomew and Horowitz, 1991). When in distress, anxiously attached individuals tend to exaggerate their emotions so their partner will respond to their needs (i.e., hyperactivating strategies), while avoidantly attached individuals tend to inhibit their emotions so they will remain independent (i.e., deactivating strategies, Mikulincer and Goodman, 2006). Insecure attachment is observed when attachment anxiety and/or avoidance is high.

Studies have shown an association between attachment insecurity and past use of sexual coercion (Abbey et al., 2007, Smallbone and Dadds, 2001). A meta-analysis concluded that only attachment avoidance was a predictor of sexual coercion (Karantzas et al., 2016). However, many studies reviewed by Karantzas et al. (2016) did not measure sexual coercion per se, but rather the desire for sexual control over one's partner. One recent study has replicated the link between attachment avoidance and sexual coercion (Langton et al., 2017), while the work of Brassard et al. (2007), Russell and King (2016), and Sommer et al. (2017) have highlighted a unique predictive effect of attachment anxiety. Overall, a relationship seems to exist between insecure attachment and sexual coercion, few studies have investigated the mechanisms at play in this association.

Negative urgency, which is the tendency to act impulsively when faced with intense negative emotions (Cyders and Smith, 2008, Whiteside and Lynam, 2001), may help understand this association between insecure attachment and sexual coercion perpetration. Mikulincer et al. (2003) have suggested that secure attachment in childhood contributes to the development of adequate emotion regulation strategies. Thus, hyperactivating and deactivating strategies can be considered as suboptimal emotion regulation strategies, which may give rise to impulsive behaviors in negative emotional contexts. To our knowledge, no study has investigated the link between attachment and negative urgency, but evidence suggests that children and adults presenting an insecure attachment may have more emotion

Table 1 Sociodemographic characteristics.

Variable	Value	Percentage (%)
Civil status	Single	45
	In a relationship	50
	Married	5
Annual revenue	Less than 20,000 \$	89
	Between 20,000 and 40 000 \$	8
	Between 40,000 and 60,000 \$	2
	Between 60 000 \$ and 80 000\$	0
Origin	More than 80,000 \$	1
	North America	42
	South America	5
	Europe	38
	Africa	4
	Asia	2
	Middle-East	3
Other	5	

regulation difficulties (Gilliom et al., 2002; Skowron and Dendy, 2004).

Considering that intense negative emotions, such as embarrassment, frustration or disappointment, may arise when a potential sexual partner refuses to engage in sexual contacts (Wright et al., 2010), emotion regulation abilities seem crucial to react adequately when faced with a sexual refusal. Indeed, Mouilso et al. (2013) have observed that three facets of the multidimensional model of impulsivity, including negative urgency, distinguished users and non-users of sexual coercion. Also, in a previous analysis of the data presented in the current article, our team has identified negative urgency as a significant predictor of sexual coercion (Carrier Emond et al., 2018).

Objective and hypothesis

The present study's objective is to test the mediating role of negative urgency in the association between attachment and sexual coercion. The hypothesis is that attachment anxiety and avoidance will predict past use of sexual coercion via negative urgency. In other words, it is expected that individuals presenting high levels of attachment anxiety and avoidance will tend to react impulsively when they experience intense negative emotions, which would explain their increased risk of having used sexual coercion in the past.

Methodology

Participants and procedure

Ninety-seven heterosexual and sexually active men aged 19 to 34 years old ($M = 22.5$, $SD = 3.1$) were invited to participate in this study through ads displayed at the University of Montreal and Polytechnique Montréal, online, and class visits (see Table 1 for sociodemographic characteristics). Participants completed online questionnaires, as well as behavioral measures which will not be discussed here (for more information, see Carrier Emond et al., submitted).

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