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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Sexual coercion in adolescence: From non-consensual sexuality to sexuality under constraint[☆]

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Sexual coercion;
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Consent;
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Perpetration and
victimization

Summary

Introduction. – Adolescence is a crucial period of psycho-sexual development during which sexuality may express in a violent way.

Objectives. – Our study analyzes the conducts of sexual coercion acted and experienced by adolescents, implying two distinct samples of teenagers ($n_1 = 301/40\%$ girls; $n_2 = 355/65\%$ girls). The first study focuses on evaluation by means of self-reported measures of conducts of sexual coercion, delinquency and experiences of sexual victimization. The second study evaluates conducts of sexual coercion acted and experienced in romantic relationship and attitudes relating to these conducts.

Results. – For both studies, it emerges that adolescents perpetrating severe sexual coercion (using threat and/or physical force) are mostly male and display violent conducts in other areas than sexuality. They report more experiences of sexual victimization than non-coercive adolescents. Although prevalence rates of sexual coercion in romantic relationships are low, phenomena of polyperpetration and polyvictimization have been pointed out. Boys are more often perpetrators of sexual fondling without consent and girls are more often victims. The potential of escalation from minor sexually coercive conducts (non-consensual kissing) to severe sexually coercive conducts is noted for boys and not for girls. Finally, boys exhibit more tolerant attitudes towards sexual coercion than girls and both are more tolerant towards sexual coercion perpetrated by girls than by boys.

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Introduction

Adolescence is a key period for psycho-sexual development. The process of maturation involves psychic, identity and narcissistic adjustments, as well as an increase in sexual impulses. From an exploratory, predominantly auto-erotic, prepubescent sexuality, the adolescent gradually moves toward the experimentation of first sexual exchanges, most often in dating relationships. However, the discovery and learning of sexuality during adolescence do not always occur smoothly and might engage in violent pathways. Sexual coercion is a means of acting and interacting sexuality in a violent way and appears to be fairly frequent among adolescents (De Graaf et al., 2015; Williams et al., 2014). However, defining sexual coercion, related concepts and its prevalence among adolescents is necessary to understand the specificities of sexual coercion behaviors in adolescence.

Sexual violence and sexual coercion: overlap of two concepts

Sexual violence and sexual coercion were mainly studied in clinical populations and juvenile sex offenders. Research addressing sexual coercion outside the field of sexual delinquency seems relatively recent and limited and its definition is not clearly established. However, sexual coercion undeniably refers to a set of behaviors and tactics aimed at persuading, manipulating or compelling an individual to engage in sexual activity against his or her will, such as the use (or threat of use) of physical force, authority, blackmail, verbal persuasion, manipulation, pressure, or alcohol and drugs, aiming to initiate sexual behavior (Testa and Dermen, 1999). By definition, sexual coercion is strongly intertwined with notions of constraint and non-consent which, rather than the nature and features of the behavior, constitute the violent component.

Three dimensions are typically identified within the concept of sexual coercion:

- psychological coercion (such as pressures, threats, blackmail);
- physical coercion (involving the use of force);
- coercion by alcohol or drugs (French et al., 2015).

Research has focused on physically forced rape, which is considered the most severe form of sexual coercion. Nevertheless, tactics of verbal coercion and facilitation by substances appear more frequent among young people (Basile, 2002; Kuyper et al., 2013). Prevalence rates of sexual coercion in adolescence are variable. The most recent studies range from 5.6 to 40% (Dupont-Reyes et al., 2014; Williams et al., 2014). Victimization rates vary between 15 and 76%. These estimates depend on definition, methods of assessment (one or more items, coercion scales...), sample characteristics (such as age) and time span examined (the last 12 months, during adolescence).

Sexual coercion and victimization

Sexual coercion has often been studied under the prism of victimization, in particular to assess its prevalence, psychological impact and co-occurrence with perpetration (French et al., 2015). Thus, 18.5% of the teenagers surveyed by Williams et al. (2014) reported having experienced unwanted sexual activity in the past twelve months and 8% of them recognized having been perpetrators. One in four girls and one in ten boys reported having faced unwanted sexual experiences in the last 12 months. Previous victimization, either during childhood or before age 16, increases the risk of undergoing sexual coercion (De Graaf et al., 2015).

Sexual coercion in adolescent dating relationships

Risk of exposure to sexual coercion are therefore especially prevalent in the context of dating relationship. Sexual coercion in adolescent dating relationships may express in many ways, as pressuring others, demeaning them, harassing them so that they engage in sexual act; forcing the partner to engage in sexual activity against his or her will or to undergo an unwanted sexual act; not ceasing sexual intercourse in spite of the other's requests. Wincentak et al.'s meta-analysis (2016) found a victimization rate of 14% for girls and 8% for boys. Regarding perpetration, rates are higher for boys than for girls (10% and 3%, respectively, Wincentak et al.'s meta-analysis, 2016), with a peak at age 15–16 (Reyes and Foshee, 2013).

The objectives of the studies

The purpose of this article is to study the patterns of sexual coercion among adolescents (14–18 years) through two researches. The first study focused on delinquent behaviors, sexual coercion and sexual victimization (recent and in childhood) and the second study assessed sexual coercion in adolescent dating relationships and related attitudes, considering gender specificities. Two distinct samples of adolescents have been recruited from the general population. Eighteen schools allowed access to students of different levels. These studies provide prevalence rates, but more importantly question the links between sexual coercion and sexual victimization, between sexual coercion and other forms of violence, between sexual coercion in dating relationships and associated attitudes.

Study 1

Method

The sample consisted of 301 adolescents (40% girls) aged 14–18 years ($M = 15.5$ years; $SD = 1.8$). They were administered a self-reported questionnaire with different variables:

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