



Resisting during sexual assault: A meta-analysis of the effects on injury



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ABSTRACT

Avoiding physical injury when confronted with sexual assault is often a major concern for potential victims. While many studies address the issue of physical injury in sexual crimes, these studies do not always agree regarding the relationship of resistance to injury, above and beyond the sexual assault itself. In addition, much of the existing literature relies on overlapping samples from the National Crime Victimization Survey, suggesting a larger literature than in fact exists. The current meta-analysis examines whether victim resistance leads to increased injury. Results from a systematic literature review across 25 databases and a search of the grey literature resulted in 4581 hits of which only 6 studies met eligibility criteria for the review. Findings suggest that resisters are more likely than non-resisters to sustain a physical injury above and beyond the sexual assault or rape. This finding holds true for physical resistance, verbal resistance, or resistance of any kind. While any type of self-protective action was found to significantly predict victim injury, the relationship between physical resistance and injury was most pronounced. Particularly given the important limitations of the analysis, including the small set of included studies and lack of moderator analysis, this examination should serve as a call and a guide for future research more so than a guide for policy.

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1. Introduction

Rape and other sexual assaults are violent crimes that impact the lives of far too many victims each year. Severe consequences accompany the violent victimization of women. In addition to the emotional and psychological traumas that women endure (Mason & Lodrick, 2013; Terry, 2013), many sustain physical injuries ranging from bruises and cuts to concussions, broken bones and teeth, disfigurement, and even death (Mieczkowski & Beaugard, 2010; Scott & Beaman, 2004; Simon, Mercy, & Perkins, 2001; Terry, 2013). There are also non-trivial societal costs to these outcomes, including medical costs, lost wages for survivors of assault, and the costs of legal system intervention (Campbell, 1998; Campbell, Wasco, Ahrens, Sefl, & Barnes, 2001; Terry, 2013).

Avoiding physical injury when confronted with sexual assault is frequently a major concern for potential victims. While many studies address the issue of physical injury in sexual crimes (Balemba & Beaugard, 2012; Balemba, Beaugard, & Mieczkowski, 2012; Block & Skogan, 1986; Brecklin & Ullman, 2005; Marchbanks, Lui, & Mercy, 1990; Ruback & Ivie, 1988; Tark & Kleck, 2004, 2014; Ullman, 1998; Ullman & Knight, 1993, 1995; Yun & Lee, 2014), these studies do not all concur regarding the relationship of resistance to injury, above and beyond the sexual assault itself. Due to this between-study controversy, as well as a general lack of studies that collect data on the focal

relationship that directly links resistance strategies to injury outcomes, few recommendations regarding resistance and injury avoidance currently exist. In the present study, we seek to review and quantitatively summarize the literature in this area to determine the relationship between victim resistance and injury in sexual crimes.

To be clear, the perpetrator of a sexual assault is unquestionably to blame for any crime or injury that results from their actions. This fact does not, however, justify a complete lack of focus on victim variables which may affect a sexual crime. The intent herein is to better understand the dynamics that take place within the context of a sexual assault, which inextricably involve the actions of the victim. Examining such factors may provide potential victims with some recourse should they find themselves face-to-face with a sexual attacker. It is in the best interest of future potential victims to determine the most beneficial course of action that she can take when faced with a sexual attack.

1.1. Victim resistance

The current study examines one of the most crucial aspects of a sexual assault incident: victim resistance and how this affects the likelihood of victim injury. Although victim resistance is only one aspect of the criminal event that affects the final outcome of victim injury, it demands specific research focus due to the major impact that such resistance can have on a sexual offense.

Substantial work in the area of victim resistance has been conducted by Sarah Ullman and colleagues, who have examined the effectiveness of resistance strategies in various circumstances (Ullman & Knight,

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1993), the effects of resistance against different types of rapists (Ullman & Knight, 1995), violence escalation (or lack thereof) in rape attacks due to victim resistance (Ullman, 1998), and the increased (and more successful) resistance from women who have received self-defense training (Brecklin & Ullman, 2005). Overall, Ullman and colleagues have found that certain situational and crime factors influence the effectiveness of victim resistance (Ullman & Knight, 1993) but that, for the most part, the victim is less likely to be injured and rape completion is less likely to occur when the victim fights back. This is true regardless of rapist type (Ullman & Knight, 1995) or offender attack strategy (Ullman, 1998).

Tark and Kleck (2014) have also examined the issue, using data from the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) to determine the proportion of victims employing self-protective actions who were injured. Importantly, this study focused on the sequence of victim self-protective behavior and injury, designating cases in which injury occurred after resistance. The authors note that serious injury is a rare occurrence and injury in general (aside from the rape itself) is not further increased by self-protective actions. Despite the data indicating that the majority of those who were injured had taken self-protective actions, the authors suggest that resistance is the wisest course of action for victims (see also Tark & Kleck, 2004).

Adding to the uncertainty of the effects of victim resistance is prior research which has shown a significant, positive relationship between victim resistance – particularly physical or forceful resistance – and victim injury (for example, Block & Skogan, 1986; Marchbanks et al., 1990; Ruback & Ivie, 1988; Yun & Lee, 2014). Marchbanks et al. (1990), also using NCVS data, examined resistance that resulted in injury requiring hospitalization. They proposed that the increased risk of physical injury was related to the escalation in offender violence that followed victim resistance. Similarly, in a sample of women experiencing nonsexual assaults, Yun and Lee (2014) used NCVS data to demonstrate a strong and positive relationship between victim self-protective actions and subsequent injury. In other words, more forceful resistance resulted in greater victim injury.

As well as the overall debate regarding the effects of victim resistance on victim injury, it has been acknowledged that there may be inherent issues within some of the victim resistance literature with respect to the proximity of resistance (temporally speaking) to the outcome of the assault (Balemba & Beauregard, 2012; Balemba et al., 2012). This is an important issue, as victim resistance may have either a direct or indirect effect on injury, e.g., victim resistance leads to increased offender violence or anger, which then increases the likelihood of injury. As such, Balemba and Beauregard (2012) and Balemba et al. (2012) incorporated a more direct dependent variable relating to the offender's specific reaction to victim resistance. Balemba and colleagues determined that physical resistance from the victim resulted in a violent reaction from the offender, regardless of whether the offender was violent from the outset of the crime. Additionally, Balemba and Beauregard (2012) determined that adult victims in particular were more likely to encounter violence as a result of physical resistance.

These studies demonstrate the importance of victim resistance strategies with respect to injurious outcomes. While the literature does not reach consensus on the exact effects of resistance, it is clear that the response on the part of the victim plays a relevant role that must be further examined and clarified. This relationship constitutes the main focus of the current analysis.

1.2. Prevention initiatives

Although previous research appears to be ambiguous and inconsistent as to the effects of resistance, training potential rape victims in situational prevention methods has recently been promoted in the literature (Gidycz, McNamara, & Edwards, 2006; Rozee & Koss, 2001; Ullman, 2007). Many current prevention programs focus on the reshaping of attitudes supportive of rape or the increase in women's

beliefs in their ability to successfully resist an attacker (Ullman, 2007). Although important factors, these alone are insufficient. Rozee and Koss (2001) promote the overcoming of psychological barriers to victim resistance, and strongly encourage victims to resist so as to increase rape avoidance, harm reduction, and psychological well-being. Gidycz et al. (2006) identify the unrealistic “optimistic bias” (p. 452) that women possess, in that they believe their risk to be lower than others' risk and their ability to handle the situation to be much better than that of other victims. These authors suggest that programs for women must address this bias in addition to helping women identify and respond to assailant threats and providing the essential skills for women to react assertively. Ullman (2007) believes that current rape prevention programs restrict women's freedoms by advising them to avoid “risky situations” (p. 425), and that programming should instead be focused on enhancing freedoms. This can be achieved by informing potential victims about risky situations, and by providing education in effective resistance strategies and methods in self-defense.

Despite the high hopes for such victim-focused prevention strategies, little research has actually been conducted on the efficacy of these programs. Research more typically examines the effects of offender-focused programming that reshapes attitudes, including changing rape myths and clarifying consent behavior, as well as addressing future behavioral intentions (see for example Clinton-Sherrod et al., 2009; Gidycz et al., 2001; Moor, 2011). One recent study used an experimental method to examine a more victim/resistance-focused approach, testing the effectiveness of a resistance education and training program on subsequent sexual assault within a college setting (Senn et al., 2015). After one year, the program demonstrated reduced victimization within the experimental group compared to the controls (Senn et al., 2015).

Research has not irrefutably shown victim resistance to result in positive results. If victim resistance – particularly physical resistance – increases the victim's likelihood of injury, it may not be the most judicious course of action to encourage such resistance from all victims across all assault scenarios. While some situational factors may dictate different levels of effectiveness from victim resistance, the first step is to determine more conclusively the current state of knowledge on the effects of resistance in sexual assaults.

1.3. Aim of study

The goal of this research is to add to the literature on the effects of victim resistance in sexual assaults, including differentiating the effects of physical and verbal resistance. Specifically, the meta-analysis will examine whether victim resistance leads to increased injury. Some previous studies call for the maximum level of victim resistance (e.g. Ullman, 1998; Ullman & Knight, 1993, 1995), while others, with a specific focus on harm reduction, may suggest somewhat diminished levels of resistance (e.g. Block & Skogan, 1986; Marchbanks et al., 1990; Ruback & Ivie, 1988; Yun & Lee, 2014). While differences from situation to situation cannot be assessed in the current analysis, we hope to arrive at a general conclusion as to the recommended course of action for sexual assault victims to take in terms of injury avoidance. While it is true that the burden of harm reduction should not lie solely within the actions of the victim, we believe victim education can help to reduce the incidence of some of the more injurious sexual assaults.

2. Methods

2.1. Approach

To examine the relationship between victim resistance and injury in sexual crimes, a systematic literature review was undertaken and the results of the identified studies were pooled together in a meta-analysis. Meta-analysis is a quantitative literature review technique that uses explicit methods to identify all existing studies meeting specific inclusion criteria, then applies objective methods to synthesize the

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