



Behavioral response to threat (BRTT) as a key behavior for sexual assault risk reduction intervention: A critical review



RaeAnn E. Anderson ^{1,*}, Shawn P. Cahill ²

¹ Kent State University, United States

² University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, United States

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ABSTRACT

Despite extensive research on sexual assault, study of the processes and behaviors central to responding to sexual assault threats is limited. The purpose of this paper is to provide a critical, narrative review of the literature on behavioral response to threat (BRTT) highlighting BRTT as mechanism of self-defense interventions and process of sexual victimization. Empirical findings regarding measurement, styles, effectiveness of different styles of BRTT, and facilitators and barriers of BRTT, are reviewed. Most individuals engage in some type of active behavior when faced with a sexual assault threat; yet, the range of the behaviors elicited can be broad and is not well captured by current measurement approaches. Assertive BRTT is the most effective response style, but few, if any, feminist self-defense intervention studies measure change in this behavior as a result of intervention. Recommendations for clinical practice include developing comprehensive measurement of BRTT and adapting interventions to decrease barriers to assertive BRTTs. Recommendations for future research include undertaking both qualitative and quantitative efforts to better characterize the range, stability, and predictors of all possible BRTT styles.

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* Corresponding author at: 144 Kent Hall, Psychological Sciences, Kent State University, Kent, OH 44240, United States. Tel.: +1 330 672 3158; fax: +1 330 672 3786.
 E-mail addresses: ander569@uwm.edu, rande52@kent.edu (R.E. Anderson).

1. Significance

Approximately 11–18% of women in the general population experience rape in their lifetimes, and this rate is higher among women on college campuses (Gross, Winslett, Roberts, & Gohm, 2006; Post, Biroscak, & Barboza, 2011). Most sexual assaults (90% or greater) are committed by someone known to the victim or survivor rather than a stranger (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). Sexual assault, a broader term that includes rape and other forms of sexual coercion, is associated with a vast array of deleterious consequences ranging from poorer physical health and increased rates of psychopathology to greater unemployment rates (Martin, Macy, & Young, 2011; Schnurr, Green, & Kaltman, 2007; Thompson et al., 2003). For an estimated 12% of the general population, the experience of sexual violence is repeated, which further worsens outcomes (Kimerling, Alvarez, Pavao, Kaminski, & Baumrind, 2007). Sexual assault is a decidedly gender-based issue, with women being more likely to experience sexual victimization, and men being more likely to perpetrate sexual victimization; following, this paper focuses on women's experiences of victimization consistent with the available literature and encourages future research to investigate the issues raised herein across genders (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). Even though the experience of sexual violence is relatively common and associated with many physical and mental health problems, there are few efficacious interventions to prevent sexual violence. The most efficacious options, such as feminist self-defense, have generally demonstrated low efficacy in reducing sexual violence with an average effect size of 0.1 (see: Anderson & Whiston, 2005) with few exceptions (see: Senn et al., 2015). Increasing the efficacy of these programs may be difficult due to limited research and understanding of the mechanism(s) of sexual victimization. These interventions are often constrained by time and limited assessment of intervention targets (e.g., threat perception and assertive behavior), which thereby stunts further intervention refinement and development. The goal of this review is to synthesize the literature on one possible mechanism of these interventions and of sexual victimization, behavioral response to threat, in order to improve the understanding and development of sexual assault risk reduction interventions. This paper will focus on processes specific to sexual assault by acquaintances as these assaults are perceived differently than threats from strangers (VanZile-Tamsen, Testa, & Livingston, 2005).

2. Behavioral response to threat

Research has begun to focus on possible internal mechanisms of sexual victimization (rather than external mechanisms, such as proximity to potential perpetrators) in order to better understand the psychological mechanisms and thus, better inform intervention. A PsyclNFO search conducted by this author for mechanism of sexual victimization revealed at least fifteen different proposed variables indicating the great range of possible explanatory variables and models. Theoretically and empirically driven research has indicated that the perception of sexual assault threats and the following response to threats are core processes and may be the core internal processes occurring during sexual victimization (Messman-Moore & Long, 2003; Noll & Grych, 2011). Indeed, Messman-Moore and Long (2003) suggest that most variables linked to victimization and revictimization, such as alcohol consumption, can be best explained by how they either a) change threat perception or b) change threat response. As such, these are the behaviors most sexual assault risk reduction programs attempt to change (see: Senn et al., 2015) and have been recommended as the focus of intervention (Roze & Koss, 2001). Studies examining threat perception and threat response simultaneously have found that threat response has greater predictive power in predicting future sexual assaults than threat perception (Messman-Moore & Brown, 2006). Yet, the study of threat response specifically has been limited by inconsistent terminology, varying methodology, and lack of consensus on which behaviors constitute threat responses. In this paper, the term behavioral response to

threat, or BRTT, is used to describe any behavior, both verbal and non-verbal, that is elicited by the threat of sexual assault. Indeed, BRTT is a new term that attempts to highlight this set of behaviors, previously identified in a variety of ways, as a unified construct. These behaviors may be singular, such as one punch, or a sequence of multiple behaviors; thus, the abbreviations BRTT and BRTTs respectively, will both be used in this paper. Some of these behaviors have already been the focus of much research (i.e., being assertive) but less frequently has this research linked the specific behavior under study to the broader scheme of understanding the entire range of behavior elicited by sexual assault threats and influences on how people might respond to the threat of sexual assault by an acquaintance. The term BRTT and this review thus attempt to encourage research that unifies these goals. In this paper, the term BRTT encompasses both planned and active behaviors such as punching or kicking an aggressor, as well as involuntary or passive responses such as tonic immobility or waiting for outside help. The term BRTT is used rather than “behavioral resistance,” as some behaviors may be produced without conscious recognition or perception of a risk. Similarly, BRTT better captures some response behaviors that may not be perceived as resistant, though they are employed as a strategic response to threat (e.g., bargaining). Across all of these scenarios, what these behaviors have in common is that they are all responses elicited by a sexual assault threat and are thus unified using the term BRTT. The term “style” denotes a general characterization of the form of the behavior or series of behaviors that constitute a BRTT. Assertive BRTTs have been the focus of previous research for many years, but investigators have used different terms and conceptualizations in this work (for example: resistance, defensive coping). Thus, it is hoped that using the term BRTT in this literature review unifies existing research and propels new investigations.

With this conceptualization, BRTT encompasses a wide range of behavior, including both verbal and non-verbal or physical responses. Prior research has generally categorized women's behavioral responses to threat into dichotomous categories along two dimensions: physical/non-physical (i.e., verbal) and forceful/non-forceful (see Table 1; Ullman, 2007). For example, kicking and screaming would be classified in the following way: physically forceful and non-physically forceful, respectively. Forceful, physical BRTTs or assertive BRTTs have been the focus of much research, as this style of BRTT is the focus of most self-defense interventions.

It is hoped that by conceptualizing these behaviors as a continuum of responses that share a common element of being elicited by threat rather than orthogonal classifications based on their form or effectiveness (as visually displayed in Table 1), a better understanding of these behaviors can be reached to inform research and intervention on sexual violence for adolescents and adults.

3. Existing interventions

Feminist self-defense interventions aim to teach at least two primary skills: recognizing a threatening situation, and behaviorally responding to it via active physical resistance; in essence, these interventions attempt to modify and enhance BRTT and implicitly or explicitly view BRTT as a mechanism of change. Indeed, Senn et al. (2015) recently published the positive results of the largest trial of a feminist self-defense risk reduction program to date; this program, using a longer intervention period and enhancing self-defense with instruction on sexuality and relationships reduced the rate of sexual assault in the intervention group by 46.3%. This program was called the Enhanced Assess, Acknowledge, and Act Sexual Assault Resistance Program, illustrating how behavioral response to threat is a key component. Yet, few intervention studies have both measured how BRTT has changed following intervention while simultaneously assessing sexual victimization. Feminist self-defense is the current gold standard for a variety of reasons (Gidycz, Orchowski, & Edwards, 2011). One important rationale for continuing to promote feminist self-defense is because these programs

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