

# Women's risk perception and sexual victimization: A review of the literature

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Received 19 July 2005; received in revised form 12 September 2005; accepted 10 January 2006

Available online 28 February 2006

## Abstract

This article reviews empirical and theoretical studies that examined the relationship between risk perception and sexual victimization in women. Studies examining women's general perceptions of risk for sexual assault as well as their ability to identify and respond to threat in specific situations are reviewed. Theoretical discussions of the optimistic bias and cognitive–ecological models of risk recognition are discussed in order to account for findings in the literature. Implications for interventions with women as well as recommendations for future research are provided.

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**Keywords:** Women's risk perception; Sexual victimization; Literature review

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## 1. Introduction

Sexual assault is an endemic problem in our society. Investigations with college students have consistently documented that approximately 15–20% of women have experienced a rape or attempted rape at some time in their lives (Brener, McMahon, Warren, & Douglas, 1999; Koss, Gidycz, & Wisniewski, 1987). Longitudinal studies suggest that between 16% and 18% of college women experienced some form of sexual victimization over brief three- to six-month periods (Gidycz, Hanson, & Layman, 1995; Gidycz, Rich, King, Orchowski, & Miller, *in press*). These estimates from college student samples are remarkably consistent with those obtained from large-scale community samples of women (Brecklin & Ullman, 2002; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). Tjaden and Thoennes (2000) conducted a nationally representative telephone survey and found that approximately 15% of the participants indicated that they had been forced to have sex. Across university and community samples it has also been found that the vast majority of assaults are perpetrated by acquaintances (e.g., Brener et al., 1999; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000; VanZile-Tamsen, Testa, & Livingston, 2005).

Certain variables place women at higher risk for assault (see Rich, Combs-Lane, Resnick, & Kilpatrick, 2004 for a review), and one such variable, risk recognition ability, has received an increasing amount of attention in the empirical literature. Whereas offenders are clearly responsible for all acts of sexual aggression and preventative efforts with men should be a priority, ethically it is essential that women be provided with the information and skills to reduce their risk for sexual assault. It follows that early identification of risk should lead to increased resistance and self-protective behaviors (Norris, Nurius, & Dimeff, 1996; VanZile-Tamsen et al., 2005) which is one of the major objectives of risk reduction programming with women (Gidycz, Rich et al., *in press*).

Within this growing body of literature, there seem to be two different levels of risk recognition. The first level pertains to a more general estimate of perceived vulnerability, whereas the second level pertains to recognition of situational risk. With regard to perceived vulnerability, researchers have noted the importance of distinguishing between population- and individual-based risk perceptions (Nurius, 2000). Norris, Nurius, and Graham (1999) suggested that an individual might possess a general awareness that women are at risk to be sexually victimized, without relating those perceptions to one's own life experiences.

The empirical evidence continues to be quite conflicting as to situational risk recognition. Some research suggests that delayed risk recognition puts women at higher risk for sexual assault (Marx, Calhoun, Wilson, & Meyerson, 2001; Soler-Baillo, Marx, & Sloan, 2005; Wilson, Calhoun, & Bernat, 1999). However, other researchers argued that the crucial issue is not so much delayed risk recognition, as it is unassertive behavioral response to a sexual assault situation (Breitenbecher, 1999; Messman-Moore & Brown, *in press*; Naugle, 2000; VanZile-Tamsen et al., 2005). There is also conflicting evidence on alcohol use and risk recognition. Results of several studies suggested that alcohol does impair risk recognition (Davis, 2000; Testa, Livingston, & Collins, 2000), whereas others have found no such relationship (Cue, George, & Norris, 1996; Livingston & Testa, 2000). Additionally, it does appear that risk recognition might be most difficult in situations where the offender is known to the victim, in that in such settings romantic cues that are quite salient often conflict with less obvious cues indicative of sexual assault risk (e.g., Norris et al., 1999).

In light of this growing body of literature and the inconsistencies across studies, a review article is warranted. This article will summarize the risk recognition and sexual assault literature and attempt to offer some explanations for inconsistencies across studies. Recent theoretical frameworks that have been proposed to help explain the correlates of risk recognition will be discussed, as well as implications for interventions and future research.

## 2. Distinction between population-based and individual-based perceptions of risk

### 2.1. Summary of the evidence

Researchers have noted the importance of distinguishing between global (population-based) and specific (individual-based) perceptions of risk for sexual assault (Norris et al., 1996, 1999). Women are aware that sexual assault occurs, but they believe that they are at a lower risk to be victimized than their peers. In fact, Norris et al. (1999) found that global perceptions of risk in college women were not related to judgments pertaining to specific situational risks (see Table 1 for a summary of relevant studies).

To date, there have been five empirical investigations that have explored women's perceptions of risk relative to others. The four studies that were conducted with college students were consistent in that women underestimated their

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