

Sexual Violence in Portuguese College Students

Subjects: Psychology

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Sexual violence (SV) covers a wide range of behaviors of a sexual nature and a plurality of contexts in which it can occur. Overall, SV can be defined as nonconsensual sexual acts . It is important to stress that such behaviors are not limited to the perpetration of rape, as that represents the extreme of a wide spectrum of sexually aggressive behaviors. Behaviors of attempted nonconsensual sexual contact or abusive sexual contact (e.g., unwanted touching), and of non-contact sexual abuse (e.g., verbal sexual harassment) are also included in the definition of sexual violence.

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1. Sexual Violence in Community Samples

Sexual violence (SV) as committed by men is a very well-known phenomenon, as literature places increasing evidence of this type of violence perpetrated by men against women. Data reveals that men's sexual violence against women occurs across the whole globe, both in developed (e.g., ^{[1][2][3]}) and developing countries (e.g., ^{[4][5][6]}). In fact, the World Health Organization estimates that more than 31% of women worldwide have experienced either physical or sexual partner violence and that 6% of women worldwide have experienced non-partner sexual assault ^[7].

When it comes to men, several studies reveal high rates of self-reported perpetration of SV. In one study conducted with young college men, approximately 32% of participants reported perpetrating at least one type of sexually aggressive behavior. Among these men, the most serious type of sexual aggression reported was forced sexual contact (5.4%), the engagement in sexual intercourse by verbal coercion (17.2%), and completed or attempted rape (9.6%) ^[8]. Additionally, 48% had engaged in one type, 22% had engaged in two types, and 30% had engaged in three or more types of sexual aggression ^[8].

In another study conducted with a Portuguese sample of male college students, 52.6% of participants reported having attempted sexual interaction using aggressive means ^[9]. More specifically, 87.7% of those men resorted to the use of sexual coercion (e.g., verbal pressure), 41.4% engaged in sexual abuse/use of power (e.g., inducing intoxication), and 7.4% used physical force (actual use of force or weapons) ^[9].

In addition to evidence on SV perpetrated by men against women, high prevalence rates of perpetration of SV have also been found among women. A similar investigation conducted with a Portuguese sample of female college students ^[10] revealed that 32.7% of women reported initiating sexual intercourse by using sexually aggressive strategies against men. More precisely, 72.3% reported to have engaged in strategies of sexual coercion, 46.5% reported to have resorted to sexually abusive behaviors, and 13.1% reported the use of physical force. In fact, SV as perpetrated by women against men is becoming as equally noticeable as SV perpetrated by men against women. Studies with college students have revealed self-reported victimization rates of 34% for women and varied from 28% to 31% for men. Overall, men and women appear to engage in various forms of SV in the same way.

2. Risk Factors

Research on perpetrators of SV has aimed to identify risk factors that underpin such behavior. Existing data on sexual offenders highlights the interpersonal deficits that characterize these individuals ^{[9][11][12]}. Intimacy deficits, such as conflicts in intimate relationships, were found to be a predictor of sexual recidivism in a meta-analysis ^[13]. Therefore, it can be considered that the difficulty to establish and maintain intimate relationships can leave individuals prone to the perpetration of sexually aggressive behaviors.

Regarding the characterization of perpetrators at an individual level, the literature reveals that a wide range of personality characteristics are associated with SV. Research conducted with college students revealed that psychopathic personality

traits (such as self-centered impulsivity) were predictors of positive attitudes toward sexually predatory behaviors in both college men and women [14]. Additionally, in a meta-analysis regarding risk factors for SV, Mann and colleagues [15] identified some personality characteristics (such as offense-supportive attitudes, lack of emotionally intimate relationships, impulsivity, recklessness, and hostility) as risk factors for recidivism. This information adds to previous research that has shown psychopathic personality traits (e.g., hostility, aggressiveness, manipulateness, erratic lifestyle, and antisocial behavior) are associated with sexually aggressive behaviors among both male and female samples (e.g., [9][16][17][18][19]).

Additionally, within this regard, an investigation with a sample of college men [19] revealed a significant and positive association between psychopathy and rape myth acceptance (RMA). Rape myths were defined in 1980 by Burt [20] as prejudiced, stereotyped, or false beliefs about rape, rape victims, and rapists. These myths most commonly serve to deny and justify male sexual assault against women [21]. Literature also provides evidence that RMA is higher among perpetrators of sexual aggression than non-perpetrators (e.g., [19][22]). Consequently, RMA seems to be a risk factor for sexual violence (e.g., [23]). Even though most research about rape myths has been conducted with a focus on male offenders, literature on female criminal samples recognizes the endorsement of a distorted cognitive style about the sexual offenses and the victims as a motivational factor for SV [24][25]. Moreover, in 2016 Bouffard and colleagues [16] have found that rape myth acceptance was significantly correlated with self-reported use of past sexual coercion in a sample of female college students. In fact, a very recent meta-analysis has found a moderate relationship between sexual coercion perpetration and RMA that is both consistent across gender and persistent over time, reinforcing RMA's role as a risk factor for sexual coercion perpetration [26].

3. Correlation between Sexual Aggression and Psychopathic Traits

Concerning RMA, one possible explanation for the small magnitude of correlation is that RMA is more strongly associated with severe forms of sexual violence rather than the use of sexually aggressive strategies. In fact, Mouilso and Calhoun [19], found that perpetrators of less severe forms of sexual aggression (i.e., sexual assault) did not differ from non-perpetrators on most of the subscales of the Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (IRMA), one of the first measures designed to assess RMA. Indeed, literature places significant evidence on the association between RMA and sexual violence behaviors measured by the Sexual Experiences Survey (SES; [22]), a measure that addresses various forms of actual perpetration of sexual aggression. Altogether, these results seem to suggest that RMA itself is insufficient to explain the perpetration of SV among community samples. Even though rape myths may play an important role by normalizing and minimizing SV, other variables (such as emotional or interpersonal factors) could help explain SV more expressively. Nonetheless, further research is necessary to clarify this issue.

Regarding the correlation between sexual aggression and psychopathic traits, the small magnitude effects can be explained by the community nature of the sample, considering that such association is well-established among incarcerated/criminal populations (e.g., [27][28]). In the light of the present findings, psychopathic traits may have a secondary role in the context of community samples engaging in sexually aggressive strategies. Researching the specific risk factors for SV among community samples is thus of paramount relevance.

Discriminant validity was established between the Sexually Aggressive Behaviors Scale (SABS-PT) and PAIR scores. Sexual aggression was negatively associated with personal validation. Such findings suggest that individuals who do not perceive validation or acceptance from their partner may resort to sexual aggression, adding to literature about interpersonal deficits characterizing sexual offenders (e.g., [9][12]). Discriminant validity was corroborated by the positive, but very small associations found between sexual aggression and communication and openness. Overall, these findings align with existent literature regarding intimacy deficits as predictors of sexual violence [13] and further suggest that intimacy dynamics may constitute a path toward SV.

The SABS-PT has further confirmed good reliability. In addition, gender invariance was established, and the results revealed that women report significantly less sexual aggression than men. However, that difference was followed by a small effect size. Such findings corroborate literature suggesting that men outnumber women as perpetrators of sexual aggression, including among community samples (e.g., [2]). Nonetheless, the small effect size of that difference must be acknowledged; the present results reveal that the differences between male and female sexual perpetration is not substantial. Such findings are in line with literature supporting that both male and female college students engage in similar patterns of SV [9][10] suggesting that SV committed in the context of young and educated samples may not align perfectly with the gender-based violence perspective on SV. Further research is warranted to clarify gender differences and similarities so preventive strategies can be refined.

Currently, the lack of valid and reliable outcome measures in the field of SV as committed by non-forensic/community samples constitutes a great limitation, particularly when assessing the efficacy of the SV prevention programs. The present research places a relevant contribution in that matter, supporting the reliability of the SABS-PT to assess sexually aggressive behaviors as committed both by male and female community members. Therefore, it could have great implications for future research on SV with Portuguese speaking participants.

Despite the relevance of this research, some limitations must be acknowledged. First, it is important to stress that the SABS items assess attempted rather than consummated sexual aggression. As so, the present findings do not inform on the prevalence of such behaviors nor reflect the perpetration of rape. Instead, findings relate to the use of sexually aggressive strategies to initiate sexual contact. Secondly, collected data can be exposed to bias as self-report measures are always prone to the participant's subjectiveness and their inhibition to answer, especially when regarding topics as sensitive as sexual aggression. Finally, the present research only included a very specific group of individuals (college students who identified as male or female and as heterosexual). Therefore, the present results cannot be generalized to other populations, including non-heterosexual or non-binary populations. Furthermore, with Portuguese being the official language in Brazil and PALOP (African countries having Portuguese as the official language), the SABS-PT may have a wide dissemination spectrum. Nonetheless, the researchers recommend the cultural adaptation of the SABS items prior to its administration in those countries.

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